Fabio Vighi

# On Žižek's Dialectics

## Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation

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# Introduction

## Not only as value, but also as surplus

This work is inspired by Slavoj Žižek's critique of capitalism and by Lacanian epistemology. Both fields are discussed in their broad theoretical significance as well as in specific connection with the notion of surplus, which constitutes the basis of my analysis of Žižek's dialectics. The division of the book into two parts reflects my intention to situate the question of surplus within capitalism first, and then in relation to dialectical thought. The overarching discussion developed in Part 1 stems from the consideration that the axis Marx-Lacan, which Žižek has undoubtedly strengthened and popularized, needs to be eviscerated in epistemological terms rather than as a straightforward political constellation. In the seminars immediately following the events of May '68 (*Seminar XVI* and *XVII*) Lacan developed an intriguing critique of Marxism founded upon the following epistemological axiom, which can be said to lie at the heart of his psychoanalytic teaching: *the weight of knowledge is unconscious*. If, in Marxian terms, labour and the knowledge thereby registered is the quantifiable common denominator of all human activity, for Lacan such equivalence needs to be reformulated in light of the inclusion of a supplement he calls surplus-*jouissance*, the senseless libidinal excess emerging with, and disturbing, all attempts at signification. I argue that Lacan's homology between Marx's notion of surplus-value (based in the capitalist's expropriation of the worker's labour-power) and surplus-*jouissance* should be grasped, first and foremost, as an attempt to demonstrate the preponderance of *jouissance* over value. Lacan shows how work, like the knowledge from which it arises, cannot be reduced to a value, for it does not coincide with its measure but is instead traversed by an entropic and recalcitrant surplus which defies quantification. Put differently, intrinsic to work is a degree of opacity which speaks for the unconscious roots of any knowledge-at-work. It is from this awareness that Lacan launches his scathing attacks against the dominance of value within the university

discourse (the hegemonic discourse of modernity), which is precisely where the capitalist function is nestled.

From Lacan's epistemological perspective, the production of a piece of conscious knowledge is always, in its deepest configuration, the result of a *revelation* whose unconscious resonance cannot be obfuscated by the introduction of credit points in the university, or by the ubiquitous valorization of experience imposed by capital. In this respect, Marx's surplus-value effectively performs a kind of "epistemological violation" of surplus-*jouissance*, despite being rooted in and drawing its strength from the latter. Lacan's key political wager, which he makes throughout *Seminar XVII*, is that the capitalist utopia of a fully valorized universe can only fail, since the indigestible remainder of the process of valorization *is* the point of universality of each and every discourse, including the capitalist one. Significantly, Lacan shifts the emphasis from the Marxian quandary concerning surplus-value to the question of human surplus, which he defines in terms of exclusion and segregation. Along similar lines, Marx's commodity fetishism appears to Lacan as the gentrified version of surplus-*jouissance*, whose disturbingly empty core is hijacked, camouflaged and converted into the propelling force behind the consumer's pursuit of ersatz-enjoyment. However, the original surplus cannot be eliminated, for it survives in exclusion. It is in the inert human surplus of capitalist dynamics, Lacan claims, that one should look for an image of truth and salvation, ultimately embodied in the motif of "brotherhood":

> The energy that we put into all being brothers very clearly proves that we are not brothers. Even with our brother by birth nothing proves that we are his brother – we can have a completely different batch of chromosomes. This pursuit of brotherhood, without counting the rest, liberty and equality, is something that's pretty extraordinary, and it is appropriate to realize what it covers. I know only one single origin of brotherhood – I mean human, always humus brotherhood – segregation. We are of course in a period where segregation, ugh! There is no longer any segregation anywhere, it's unheard of when you read the newspapers. It's just that in society – I don't want to call it "human" because I use the term sparingly, I am careful about what I say, I am not a man of the left, I observe – everything that exists, and brotherhood first and foremost, is founded on segregation. No other brotherhood is even conceivable or has the slightest foundation, as I have just said, the slightest scientific foundation, unless it's because people are isolated together, isolated from the rest. (Lacan 2007: 114)

I argue that what we have in this conflation of segregation and brotherhood is a profoundly dialectical figure that needs to become the catalyst of a new political discourse of universal emancipation. A political epistemology derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis provides us with a dialectical framework where knowledge – intended in its indissoluble tie with fantasy as the substance of our immersion in the socio-symbolic order – is defined by both its intrinsic materiality and entropic surplus. As I try to illustrate by bringing the focus on the half-forgotten figure of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, it is crucial to insist on the question of the materiality of knowledge-at-work, or the unity of head and hand, which in truth is also central to Lacan's stance. The historical novelty of the capitalist process that leads to the creation of surplus-value, he claims, is centred on the extraction of knowledge from the slave/worker. During this process the entropy originally consubstantial with knowledge is converted into value and marketed as enjoyment. The whole point, however, is that the gap between "obscure" knowledge-at-work and capitalist enjoyment does not disappear, but returns in the form of "human waste", namely the ghostly masses of slum-dweller produced by, and simultaneously excluded from, the dynamics of value-formation.

It is from the vantage point of a Lacanian epistemology based in the potential re-articulation of knowledge via its "unconscious materiality" that I consider some of Žižek's key terms, such as parallax and subtraction. I see these terms as profoundly dialectical, for they reassert the primacy of contradiction and negativity in the naturalized realm of capital. We should not lose sight of the fact that the so-called loss of values and angst-ridden fragmentation of experience that accompanies our pursuit of enjoyment is sustained by and conducive to the affirmation of an increasingly unquestioned socio-symbolic framework characterized not only by the free circulation of commodities, but also by systematic violence, human exploitation and exclusion. It is against this subtly disavowed and yet fully operative framework that I examine the dialectical impact of parallax and subtraction, exploring the extent of their continuity with Lacan's notion of surplus-*jouissance* as well as with Žižek's Hegelian motif of "tarrying with the negative".

Part 2 begins with an evaluation of the political potential inscribed in Žižek's appraisal of subjectivity. While exploring the Lacanian and Hegelian origins of Žižek's concept of the subject, I first unravel his groundbreaking analysis of how the subject connects with the ideological fantasy woven in external reality. The key point here is that since our being caught in ideology ultimately depends on our unconscious libidinal attachments (i.e. on a strictly speaking non-ideological feature which at the same time sustains also the ideological field), it follows that we are never fully aware of

the extent of our subjection. With regard to this point, it is worth noting that in his essay 'Free Time' Adorno tells us a slightly different story. Though he had clearly identified the coercive character of the injunction to enjoy typical of consumer capitalism, he thought that the subject's awareness of the ideological role played by enjoyment implied a certain wisdom and potential liberation from ideology. While analysing the public reactions in Germany to the 1966 wedding between Princess Beatrix of Holland and junior German diplomat Claus von Amsberg, Adorno admits that 'people enjoyed it as a concrete event in the here and now quite unlike anything else in their life'. However, many of them also

> showed themselves to be thoroughly realistic, and proceeded to evaluate critically the political and social importance of the same event [. . .]. What the culture industry presents people with in their free time, if my conclusions are not too hasty, is indeed consumed and accepted, but with a kind of reservation, in the same way as even the most naive theatre or filmgoers do not simply take what they behold there for real. Perhaps one can go even further and say that it is not quite believed in. It is obvious that the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion. [. . .] I think that we can here glimpse a chance of maturity (*Mündigkeit*), which might just eventually help to turn free time into freedom proper. (Adorno 1991: 196–97)

If this consciousness, for Adorno, implies that freedom from ideology is still possible, for Žižek it signifies an even more effective form of ideological enslavement. Žižek's ideology critique relies on Lacan's motto "les non-dupes errant": those who think that they are not being fooled are in the wrong, for ideology is particularly effective over those who count on a degree of imaginary dis-identification from the ideological predicament – this being especially true of the cynical post-modern subject who believes precisely through disbelief. In this sense, psychoanalytic critique significantly updates the classical Marxian theory of alienation, according to which, once freed from capitalist ideology, human beings will be able to embrace the right (non-alienated) desires and satisfy all their needs. Against this utopian view, Žižek sides with Lacan in claiming that alienation is nothing less than *subjectivity's very condition of possibility*. We form our identity and are able to interact with others only through self-alienation, i.e. by depositing some knowledge about ourselves into that off-limits reservoir we call the unconscious. Thought itself is co-extensive with a practice of separation

from the surplus which traverses thought as well as external reality and its causal link – inasmuch as thought is always caught in the latter, and as such it can only emerge and expand in the big Other.

What would seem to bedevil Žižek's materialism is that it requires thought to be heteronomous instead of autonomous, that is to say dependent on conditions which in the last and crucial instance are external to (political) consciousness. Such materialism cannot emerge as *causa sui* but is triggered by "miraculous" occurrences that escape its radar, its conscious control. Similarly to Alain Badiou's notion of the event, the Žižekian act is unverifiable, subject to conditions that cannot be thought in advance. More precisely, Žižek's dialectics are predicated upon a coincidence or overlapping of lacks: the subject qua empty signifier, $\mathbb{S}$, and the non-existence of the big Other, $S(\mathbb{A})$. For Badiou, what matters are evental contingencies which thought has to recognize and show fidelity to; for Žižek, radical change emerges *ex nihilo*, from the contingent cracks of historicity in which the subject discovers its own core. This is why Žižek argues that a genuine materialist embraces the destabilizing surplus qua lack constitutive of *jouissance*, with no guarantee that some good might result from this act: 'A true materialism joyously assumes the "disappearance of matter," the fact that there is only void' (Žižek 2004c: 25).

It would be misleading, however, to place all the emphasis on the moment of negativity, for Žižek's dialectics endorse the Lacanian 'connection between death-drive and creative sublimation: in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death-drive (Hegelian self-relating absolute negativity) has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place, and thus making it ready for creation' (Žižek 2008c: xxx). As is well known, Žižek has developed this dialectical sequence in close connection with theology, insofar as he sees in the Christian narrative of Fall and Redemption a perfect representation of what is needed today. With this regard he not only claims that 'the subversive kernel of Christianity [. . .] is accessible *only* to a materialist approach', but also that 'to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience' (Žižek 2003b: 6). Žižek's atheistic interpretation of Christianity as implicitly dialectical and materialistic is not the object of this study. However, it does provide a clear entry point to the understanding of the two terms of Žižek's dialectics that I consider alongside surplus, namely subtraction and sublimation.

The central Lacanian thesis apropos surplus-*jouissance* is that the surplus therein articulated corresponds to a void, a lack to be intended as a "passage through symbolic death", which as such represents the substantial and implicitly traumatic ingredient of any authentic instance of subtraction. On

the one hand, I examine the political import of subtraction in relation to the considerable centripetal and cooptative resources of both capitalism and liberal democracy, as well as alongside the Lacanian topos of human exclusion. On the other hand, I contend that the second, necessary dialectical step of the concrete reconfiguration of surplus into a new order must be conceived of as disengaged from the theory vs. praxis framework in which it is generally placed. The diatribe on the practical implications of the Žižekian act is not examined in this book, due to the fact that I regard it, strictly speaking, as a false problem. Rather than claiming a direct connection with practical interventions, sublimation should first be located within the vertiginous dimension of thought, for it implies the creative task of thinking a new social constellation characterized by a radically changed calibration of the Symbolic vis-à-vis the Real surplus of *jouissance*. In Herbert Marcuse's exemplary words: 'The groundwork for building the bridge between the "ought" and the "is", between theory and practice, is laid within theory itself' (Marcuse 1972: 66). If a dialectical materialism informed by Lacanian epistemology can only be prompted and authenticated by the collapse of knowledge qua subtraction from our comfortable immersion in the shared horizon of meaning, it must at some point *coincide with* the effort of reclaiming the unthought of thought, that 'disembodied rational machine' (Žižek 2000: 62) unreachable and yet inseparable from thought's historically given terrain.[1] The surplus of knowledge is identical to both its erasure and the spark of an intuition that springs from the unconscious and opens up the space for a new constellation. If knowledge first needs to be evacuated, the glimmer of another dimension is already inscribed in its collapse. The two moments (negativity and the spark of the new) belong together, and together they oppose the "dead knowledge" of the university discourse. What I have in mind is the sudden, inexplicable, exalting awareness of children, poets, great philosophers and political thinkers who have not severed the link with the flash of "unknown knowledge" which constitutes the unconscious.

I want to conclude this Introduction by way of an example from my academic experience. In my undergraduate course on European Cinema, the first three films that students are required to watch are (what I regard as) three gems of contemporary cinema: *The Son's Room* (Nanni Moretti), *Three Colours: Blue* (Krszysztof Kieslowski) and *The Man without a Past* (Aki Kaurismaki). What strikes me about these works is, to put it succinctly, their almost coincidental reliance on a very precise narrative structure, which I do not hesitate to call dialectical. In all three films, everything hinges on a surplus of knowledge which proves to have both a traumatic and (at least potentially) liberating effect on the main characters. In *The Son's Room*, the

knowledge in question concerns the son, and emerges only after his tragic death: nobody in the family had realized the extent to which he was alive, i.e. pervaded by a destabilizing desire. In *Blue*, the surplus of knowledge concerns the husband. Again, only after his tragic death does his wife realize that he was leading a second life: he had a lover, with whom he was starting a new family. Finally, in *The Man without a Past*, the knowledge in question concerns the main character himself, who after being mugged loses his memory, reawakens in the slums of the big city (Helsinki), and refashions his life among the "human debris" of modern society. The magic of all three films lies in the way they show us that the traumatic "unplugging" from the socio-symbolic order (here family life as symptomatic of the insularity of social existence under capitalist conditions), opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the symbolic order itself, improving its content. It is an implicitly Christian dialectic of Subtraction and Sublimation, suggesting that the only way out of our current dilemma depends on connecting with what we should call with its proper name: the unconscious, insofar as the unconscious is "a knowledge that does not know itself", and as such can only come about through the dispelling of the fantasy that sustains our subjectivity. What collapses in the three narratives is the fantasy of the family as microcosm, the real and metaphorical socio-symbolic narrative which gives meaning to our lives. Once the main characters reach "ground zero" of their subjectivity, they are forced to reconfigure their fictional framework, moving in a direction which suggests (especially in *The Man without a Past*) a different relationship with the big Other.

It would be easy to show how contemporary cinema has indeed grasped the necessity of this dialectical sequence, expressing it in a variety of metaphorical and metonymical ways. The lesson coincides with the tragic yet pressing awareness that the only chance we have to survive our predicament is, as Žižek claims quoting Lenin, to "begin from the beginning again" (Žižek 2009c: 86). This, however, will only be possible if we find a way to relate to entropic subjectivities which either exceed the logic of capital as their inert remainders, or have learnt to disengage from it. More to the point, the dialectical and political task ahead will need to be informed by an understanding of theory not only as interpretation, but also as a daring and constructive reorientation of the subject's relation to a new social fantasy. Badiou states that 'truths are eternal because they have been created and not because they have been there forever' (Badiou 2009a: 512). If this view is, as I believe, to be taken seriously, it is not merely because it indicates that we should be faithful to already created truths, but because it implies that we should dare to fill them with new meanings, to create them again. Though this, as Žižek argues, may not be the philosopher's task,[2] it will probably have to become so.

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# Part 1

# The Enjoyment of Capitalism

*What happens is surely wild and obscene, virile and tasty, quite immoral – and, precisely because of that, perfectly harmless.*

*(Herbert Marcuse)*

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Chapter 1

# The will to enjoyment

Slavoj Žižek's dialectics can be said to begin with the insight that capitalism, like all social orders, is stained by a self-generated excess which makes it incomplete, inconsistent and therefore vulnerable. However, the epistemological novelty of the capitalist discourse is that, unlike previous formations, it does not hide or disavow its constitutive excess; rather, it elevates it into 'the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money' (Žižek 2002a: 277). Particularly with global capitalism, we enter a "post-historical" era dominated by the ubiquitous injunction to consume in excess (from ordinary material products to – increasingly – lifestyles, fashions, cultural/spiritual/sexual experiences).[1] *What* we consume is irrelevant; it only matters that we continue to consume. The first thing to notice about this overwhelming and yet subtle command is that it leaves us as disorientated as the proverbial punch-drunk boxer: it disables us from understanding our predicament itself. This is why today's key existential feature is not that we cannot remember and make sense of our past, but that 'the present is experienced as a confused succession of fragments which rapidly evaporate from our memory' (Žižek 2002a: 277). The catch is that the more capitalism coincides with its self-generated excess, the more we are caught in its vortex. What could threaten the system's consistency is turned into its raison d'être, ultimately the very matrix of our social life.

## An itch named *jouissance*

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the excess we are dealing with corresponds to the category of *jouissance*, which I have chosen to leave in its French original to distinguish it from what I refer to as enjoyment, or pleasure. *Jouissance* can be defined as a senseless libidinal surplus, experienced as a lack, which is inerasable from the symbolic field, i.e. from any knowledge. As such, it retains a substantial status: it is the elusive, ultimately unconscious substance

secreted by the signifier (language) the moment it comes into play, and henceforth it both drives and disturbs all human activity. Put differently, *jouissance* bears witness to the fact that our existence is irredeemably tainted by a disturbing excess of libido which materializes the inconsistency of any knowledge we acquire and identify with. More to the point, its presence signals that in us there is an unconscious knowledge that we are unable to access.[2] This unconscious knowledge dupes our consciousness, inasmuch as a dupe, Lacan states, is someone *exploited* by someone else. Updating Marxism, then, psychoanalysis tells us that 'the exploiter is less easy to grasp' (since it overpowers us by catching us "in the gut", without our realizing it), and so is 'the style of revolution' (*Seminar XVI*, 5 March 1969).

Lacan's four discourses (master, hysteric, university and analyst), as presented in *Seminar XVII*, are as many attempts to locate the position and function of the unconscious, and thus of *jouissance*, within our social lives as speaking beings. For Lacan the basic problem for us humans, as opposed to animals,[3] is how to deal with *jouissance*, in other words *how to manage the constitutively unmanageable libidinal surplus produced the very moment we say 'I'* – the moment we enter the social link and become self-conscious beings. The problem, therefore, coincides with our very nature as human beings: against Darwin's theory of adaptation, Lacan claims that what makes us human is our basic, foundational *disconnection* from our environs, which is embodied by that "sabotaging surplus" called *jouissance* – or, in Freudian terms, death-drive. Furthermore, by uncoupling us from the immersion in our environs, this surplus represents *the only measure of our freedom*, i.e. our autonomy from the "flat surface of being" where consciousness does not yet exist. As visual examples of this discrepancy between subject and environs, Žižek mentions the blurred background in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Alfred Hitchcock's early films or Orson Welles' extreme close-ups, claiming that 'this irreducible gap between the subject and its "background", the fact that a subject never fully fits its environs, is never fully embedded in it, *defines* subjectivity' (Žižek 2006b: 45). This fact – our coincidence with our surplus of sense – lends Lacan's theory both a tragic and ethical character: although *jouissance* will always find a way to pop up, making our lives hellishly inconsistent with the meanings we ascribe to them, it is our ethical duty to "enjoy our symptoms". We must assume this alien kernel as our own, in the paradoxical awareness that the surplus that inhabits us is the very core of what we are, the only place where we truly become subjects.

As Žižek often stipulates, what is at stake in the endorsement of *jouissance* over our immersion in the socio-symbolic order is the risky and onerous chance to begin anew, the massive task of resignifying our symbolic space,

filling it with a different content. This is indeed the leitmotif of Žižek's dialectics. Complex questions of political change are tied to a move which cannot be fully constrained in rational, strategic evaluations, as it is ultimately authorised only by itself. There is no promise of fulfilment, or of dialectical synthesis, in this choice, only the unverified possibility of a "better failure",[4] which will depend on our ability to reset and improve the social administration of our life. Here, at least two legitimate questions immediately emerge. How is it possible to debunk capitalism via surplus if capital itself explicitly endorses the latter as its key generative matrix? Furthermore, how are we supposed to conceive of the relationship between Žižek's theoretical wager and a corresponding political practice, especially within the context of global capitalist affirmation and the attendant political misery of the left?

The most fruitful way to address the first question (and, as we shall see, eventually also the second) is by exploring Lacan's overarching argument, exposed primarily in *Seminar XVI* and *XVII*, that the ruse of capitalism, in its infinite plasticity and resilience, lies in surreptitiously hijacking and converting *jouissance* into value – into something which, as Marx described so convincingly, is valorized and exchanged as commodity with the only aim of generating more value (and *not* of satisfying real needs). Through this conversion, Lacan argues, the system's intrinsic limit, its "itch", is transformed into its main strength, literally its productive engine. The itch of valorized enjoyment drives the capitalist machine forward, to the extent that – to continue with the metaphor – the more we scratch it, the more we help the system to reproduce itself. With capitalism this itch becomes endemic and irresistible, colonizing every aspect of our lives, and securing their overall meaning. Indeed, today's predicament is that we *know* we are alive only because we feel the urge to scratch the itch of valorized enjoyment. This operation does not merely entail going after commodities with ferocious determination, but, more extensively, taking part in a universe where each one of its meaningful experiences is characterized as representing a certain exchange value. It is therefore a totalizing gesture.

Given this premise, I argue for the importance of retaining the Lacanian focus on the historical shift in the function of *jouissance* caused by the advent of capitalism. As anticipated, the novelty of capitalism as an economic and socio-historical framework (interspersed with cyclical crises in turn linked to social turmoil and wars which have very rarely had a drastic impact on the framework itself) is that it is founded on an *explicitly* obscene and therefore shameless rhetoric. Capitalism does not hide its disturbing surplus but rather puts it on display in order to profit from it – which is why Lacan calls it the discourse of the perverted master. In focusing on the combination of

obscenity and shamelessness that characterizes the capitalist itch, Žižek's analysis in many respects revives the critical approach of the Frankfurt School developed, for instance, by Herbert Marcuse. Here is a passage from Marcuse's 1969 *Essay on Liberation* which is still relevant to our understanding of today's predicament:

> This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce food-stuffs in the fields of its aggression; obscene in the words and smiles of its politicians; in its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals. [. . .] The reaction to obscenity is shame, usually interpreted as the physiological manifestation of the sense of guilt accompanying the transgression of a taboo. The obscene exposures of the affluent society normally provoke neither shame nor a sense of guilt, although this society violates some of the most fundamental moral taboos of civilization. [. . .] Thus we are faced with the contradiction that the liberalization of sexuality provides an instinctual basis for the repressive and aggressive power of the affluent society. This contradiction can be resolved if we understand that the liberalization of the Establishment's own morality takes place within the framework of effective controls; kept within this framework, the liberalization strengthens the cohesion of the whole. (Marcuse 1972: 17–18)

Although Žižek often distances himself from the Freudo-Marxist propensity to turn political deadlocks into libidinal ones, it is undeniable that the foundations upon which his critique of capitalism is premised are rooted in a productive amalgamation of psychoanalysis and Marxism. The key ideological role played by commodified libido was first systematically identified by the Frankfurt School. While Žižek emphatically shares, and in fact updates this diagnosis, he also attempts to politicize it in ways which take us beyond Freudo-Marxism. In this respect, he has inaugurated an immensely fruitful field of study within which to elaborate an original theory of the *demise* of the capitalist social link. I argue that if this theory, embedded as it is in a negative ontology, awaits the historical chance to prove its effectiveness, it is also, perhaps more urgently, in need of being developed dialectically into its own generative counterpart. The underlying intention of my work is to explore the connection between a breathtakingly innovative critical theory structured around the Hegelo-Lacanian overlapping of universality and negativity, and its dialectical other. This other, I claim, consists of

the creative intervention delineating how the destructive force of the negative can be transubstantiated into a new order. In this respect, we must ask: is the explosive capacity of *jouissance* effective enough to help dissolve the old horizon of meaning and disclose the contour of a new one? Consequently, how are we to think the strategic rehabilitation of *jouissance* within an alternative (non-capitalist) social order? If it is not given to us to get rid of the itch, how can we change its function?

## For they know what they do not do . . .

To start tackling these questions, let us briefly consider the pervasiveness of the ideological function of enjoyment in our world. My overarching point is that the injunction to enjoy has become such an irresistible and totalizing ideological category precisely because, by feigning a non-ideological function, it prevents the concrete constitution of collective political projects which may seriously challenge capitalism. It is because of the subtle but nonetheless hegemonic injunction to enjoy that today we are unable to even imagine the formation of social spaces and practices alternative to those imposed by capital. The problem here concerns not only the economy (the regulation of the market), but also the sad transformation of politics into a consumer good, or valorized enjoyment. In this respect, Žižek is fully entitled to criticize the call for more "political passion" within the leftist camp.[5] To claim that today's left needs to engage more fervently in the democratic competition in order to match the engagement of the right is both theoretically simplistic and practically counterproductive. Injecting political passion into a weak project, a project that *in itself* is unable to mobilize the people, is vacuous and self-defeating. To put it succinctly: before being passionate about its politics, today's left has to reinvent a politics to be passionate about. The main fault of the left is not the insufficient libidinal attachment to its politics, or the distance from the "real needs" of the people, but its by now chronic and obdurate inability to devise a project that might command an enthusiastic popular response. From this important perspective, currently the right enjoys a clear structural advantage: even where it claims to accept values of tolerance, moderation and respect for democracy, the message that reaches the people is redolent with obscene enjoyment (full of racist, sexist, egotistic undertones). Although today the official line of the major right-wing parties has to endorse the basic democratic rules, it surreptitiously interpellates voters at the level of their "dirty (anti-democratic) underbelly". An explicit example of this strategy comes

in the form of a recent documentary showing Mario Borghezio, an Italian MEP for the populist Lega Nord (Northern League), as he speaks at a meeting of French neo-fascists on new tactics to gain power through political infiltration. Unaware of the hidden camera, Borghezio advises his French colleagues that to avoid being labelled "nostalgic fascists" they should *pretend* to engage in regional politics of all kinds while deep down fighting for fascist agendas.[6]

The lesson of contemporary politics is thus that partial, unofficial right-wing investment in obscene enjoyment effectively neutralizes the condition of possibility of any alternative discourse, while simultaneously maintaining sufficient conditions for global capitalism to thrive. In such a scenario, the left would seem to have two options: either continue condemning right-wing excesses while claiming moral superiority – a strategy which, given the current historical conjuncture, is palpably short-sighted (or can only yield momentary, inconsequential success), since the right has learnt to promote a liberal agenda *secretly* anchored in these excesses; or, in a much more daring and difficult move, it can attempt to reinvent itself through a project that effectively taps into unconscious forms of collective enjoyment. As Žižek argues, crucial to such a choice would be the break with liberal democracy, for until we persist in supplementing blind capitalist dynamics, susceptible to crises and annexed social turbulence, with calls for more democracy, the political advantage will always rest with a right that has learnt to play on two tables simultaneously (democracy and illicit enjoyment), while the left sticks to the anodyne, deeply contradictory defence of "capitalism with a human face".

Currently, the liberal left has joined the right in the unbearably hypocritical call for the abandonment of "old-fashioned" ideological positions. However, while the hypocrisy of the right hides a series of strong (revolting) passionate attachments, the hypocrisy of the left is suspended upon its own structural emptiness. Undoubtedly, for the left this is the outcome of at least two decades of (to put it generously) political convalescence and regrouping following the epochal collapse of socialism. What has nevertheless become clear now is that any alliance between the left and global capital ends up favouring the populist right. In fact, one is tempted to claim that in its depoliticized obsession with technocratic competence and multiculturalism, contemporary leftist politics is itself a product of the triumph of the capitalist "will to enjoyment". Its secret, unacknowledged aim is less to challenge the right than to share with the right the enjoyment of (the discourse of) capital. My contention is that it is from the questioning of this will to enjoyment that we should begin anew if we are to learn how to

dismantle the capitalist (dis)order and prevent the catastrophic consequences that for some decades now have been looming on the horizon.

## Helots of the regime

Lacan claimed that the proliferation of commodified enjoyment amounts to a caricature of *jouissance*, a potentially (self-)destructive injunction to embrace excessive enjoyment which is nevertheless constantly balanced out and domesticated by opposite discourses aimed at re-inscribing us into the comfort of the pleasure principle. With regard to the elusiveness of the capitalist injunction to enjoy, it seems to me that at the heart of Žižek's enquiry there lie the following key questions, whether explicitly or implicitly addressed by Žižek himself. First, the *reciprocity* of enjoyment as an ideological category: both the deceptively simple question of our enjoyment of capitalism and its products, and the inverted proposition concerning how capitalism enjoys us, or enjoys itself through us (which also means that in the phrase "the enjoyment of capitalism" the genitive should retain all its semantic ambiguity). Secondly, the wager that the category of enjoyment has to do, simultaneously, *with capitalism and anti-capitalism*, inasmuch as it is (1) what propels capital forward in its headless drive towards profit-making; (2) what keeps consumers libidinally attached to the capitalist machine; and (3) also what allows us to imagine the breaking up of the current order.

The main merit of Žižek's speculative method is to be found in the way it unambiguously asserts that capitalism *is* its own excess, pinpointing for us a series of significant consequences. As we have seen, Žižek claims that the strength and originality of capitalism as an ideological apparatus – what marks it out as a historically unique phenomenon – is that it explicitly endorses its intrinsic imbalance. Its key injunction and substance can be summed up in one word: Enjoy! This means not only that capitalist ideology compels us to enjoy commodities, but also that *we* want capital to keep enjoying itself (through us). Thus the two forms of enjoyment merge into one, making it difficult to distinguish between the two traditional categories of Hegelo-Marxist dialectics, namely "masters" and "servants". If capitalism has its servants, they belong to that category of people whose inclination Étienne de la Boétie touched upon in his masterpiece *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1548). In la Boétie's treaty (explicitly directed against single tyrants, but not accidentally written right at the dawn of the capitalist era) we discern the kind of masochism which psychoanalysis will

brand as a universal feature of the human race: the eroticization of all positions of subjection.[7] What happens with the advent of capitalism is that "voluntary servitude", the intrinsically masochistic attitude towards power, is progressively obfuscated and transformed into the semblance of its opposite, namely the freedom to enjoy one's freedom. The masses support the conditions that determine their own exploitation, angst and unhappiness, becoming their own worst enemies, insofar as they perceive their own freedom in these conditions.

This is why, in his well-known "Impromptu at Vincennes" on 3 December 1969, Lacan called the Marxist-Leninist students 'helots', referring to a particular type of serfs owned by the Spartan state in ancient Greece.[8] When one of the students-agitators scornfully called Lacan a 'liberal', he replied:

> I am, like everybody is, liberal only to the extent that I am antiprogressive. With the caveat that I am caught up in a movement that deserves to be called progressive, since it is progressive to see the psychoanalytic discourse founded, insofar as the latter completes the circle that could perhaps enable you to locate what it is exactly that you are rebelling against – which doesn't stop that thing from continuing extremely well. And the first to collaborate with this, right here at Vincennes, are you, for you fulfill the role of helots of this regime. You don't know what that means either? The regime is putting you on display. It says, "Look at them enjoying!". (Lacan 2007: 208)

Lacan was here suggesting that the university discourse (the modern hegemony of scientific knowledge, of which capitalism is part) domesticates and integrates all excesses, turning even Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries into surplus-value. What commentators often disregard is that in positing the homology between surplus-value (*plus-value*) and surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*), Lacan uses the latter to debunk the former. With *plus-de-jouir*, he plays on the ambiguity of *plus* in the French language, insofar as it stands for both a plus (something in excess) and a lack (a break in or renunciation of enjoyment). Hence his address to the students, who in his eyes have failed to realize that capitalism looks at their excitement about the (sexual) revolution in the same way as it looks at the excitement of consumers in front of a shop window (or, more appropriately today, the window of a computer screen). The students, Lacan charges, are unable to see how their revolutionary enthusiasm does not correspond to an authentic event, but is instead one of the effects of the paradigm shift set in motion by the onslaught

of the university discourse.[9] It could be said that 1968 represented another chance for capital to demonstrate its ability to transform surplus-enjoyment into surplus-value. In 1968, capital enjoys (makes a profit out of) looking at students enjoying/copulating (either enjoying playing at the revolution, or enjoying the sexual revolution). Within the university discourse, knowledge, occupying the hegemonic position, produces surplus-value qua enjoyment – it deprives *jouissance* of its function (that of an "indigestible" surplus which coincides with a lack) to convert it into value. The revolutionary spirit of 1968, as well as the subversive activities of the 1970s, was likewise hijacked and turned into a valorized spectacle, a commodity whose "explosive potential" was not only constantly monitored, but also produced and regulated by the perverted master of the capitalist discourse. The explosion of political *jouissance* (extra-parliamentary splinter groups, armed struggle, etc.) was scientifically manoeuvred by capital (whose sole interest was to retain its hegemonic role during a period of crisis), with the kind intercession of its political ally, liberal democracy. As is well known, the latter did not hesitate to secretly mobilize the neo-fascist right to make sure that nothing would change. The so-called strategy of tension, especially rife in Italy, has constantly worked as a most powerful weapon in the hands of capital and its servants. Precisely by virtue of the background presence of the market stage-managing social upheavals, Lacan warns the leftists to "sound the depth of their commitments":

> meaning is provided by the sense each of us has of being part of this world, that is, of his little family and of everything that revolves around it. Each of you – I am speaking even for the leftists – you are more attached to it than you care to know and would do well to sound the depths of your attachment. A certain number of biases are your daily fare and limit the import of your insurrections to the shortest term, to the term, quite precisely, that gives you no discomfort – they certainly don't change your world view, for that remains perfectly spherical. (Lacan 1998: 42)

## Ghosts in the machine

At this juncture, however, we should consider Žižek's claim that the ruthless commodification of enjoyment wrought by capitalism does not decree the failure of a Lacanian critique based on the location of *jouissance* within the social link. Rather, it calls for the radicalization of its application. How? Žižek invites us to keep faith with Marx's well-known thesis from Volume 3

of *Capital* that '[t]he real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself' (Marx 1981: 206):

> This is why we should remain faithful to Marx's fundamental insight: unbridled capitalist expansion encounters its limit not in an external factor – the available ecological resources, for example – but in itself: the limit of capitalism is absolutely intrinsic to it – or, as Marx himself put it, the limit of capitalism is capital itself. (Žižek 2002a: 277)

What he means by this has nothing to do with the evolutionary reading of Marx according to which the productive forces (means of production and labour power) will outgrow the relations of production (capitalist/workers) to the point that, after the revolution, the capitalist relations will be replaced by new ones. Žižek is well aware that the discord between the productive forces and the relations of production is at once the limit and the strength of our economic system, insofar as it '*drives capitalism into permanent development*':

> Herein lies the paradox proper to capitalism, its last resort: capitalism is capable of transforming its limit, its very impotence, in the source of its power – the more it "putrefies", the more its immanent contradiction is aggravated, the more it must revolutionize itself to survive. (Žižek 1989: 52)

The true point of contention is therefore somewhere else. For Žižek, to claim that capitalist expansion contains an 'absolutely intrinsic' limit which threatens to bring about its own collapse is to assert that contemporary capitalism produces explosive contradictions: 'The only *true* question today is: do we endorse this "naturalization" of capitalism, or does contemporary global capitalism contain antagonisms which are sufficiently strong to prevent its indefinite reproduction?' (Žižek 2008a: 421). As a rule, Žižek mentions four main antagonisms: ecological catastrophes; the difficulty of maintaining private property in an increasingly digitalized economy that functions by investing borrowed money; biogenetic manipulation; and the problem of exclusion (slums). Among these four, he is adamant that the key antagonism is the one concerning the dialectics of inclusion-exclusion, which he usually discusses in connection with the proliferation of slums: 'So what if the new proletarian position is that of the inhabitants of slums in the new megalopolises? The explosive growth of slums over the last decades, especially in the Third World mega-cities [. . .] is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times' (Žižek 2008a: 424). As it will become apparent in

the course of the book, I endorse Žižek's claim that 'the principal task of the twenty-first century is to politicize – organize and discipline – the "destructured masses" of slum-dwellers' (Žižek 2008a: 427). Only this task today justifies the use of the term communism.

The increasing number of those "ghosts" who vegetate outside, on the margins of, and increasingly also *inside* the capitalist universe,[10] as a consequence of capital's destructive self-enhancing logic, is indeed *the most striking example of capital's failure to turn every excess into value.* It confirms the Lacanian axiom that every social link has its internal impediment, its lost object that cannot be integrated and from which any subversive strategy should begin. If, then, as Marx discovered, surplus-value is the ghost-like excess feeding the capitalist machine in an ever-expanding deterritorializing movement that seems to know of no obstacles, we can see how this vertiginous movement creates an inert human surplus which it is unable to co-opt. The "ghost in the machine" that causes the permanent self-revolutionizing flow of capital eventually materializes as human surplus, "really existing ghosts" who lead a marginalized, often invisible life in a universe ruled by the free circulation of commodities. Millions of slum-dwellers – but also *us* insofar as we are progressively deprived of our "subjective substance" – are effectively human waste, homologous to the sky-scraping heaps of waste that confront the capitalist drive towards limitless production. And though recycling may be capital's solution to the problem of inordinate production, this solution does not work with humans.[11]

We should therefore affirm the equivalence between Lacan's surplus-*jouissance* and the surplus of excluded subjects in the name of a return to the dimension of class struggle, and simultaneously a thorough redefinition of the political – indeed, of the meaning of being human. The antagonistic relation of inclusion-exclusion is class dialectics at its purest, and not, as we are told, the result of an irrational historical or geopolitical fate, a mere question of fortunate vs. unfortunate people (see Žižek 2006b: 301). If there is a foreclosed political dimension today, it is to be found in this antagonism. Following Lacan's advice to the students (see Lacan 2007: 190), let us stress that we need the *political* courage to look for brothers in the lumpenproletariat, the real point of exclusion of our capitalist universe. If this is the difficult (impossible?) thing to do for anyone who is 'up to his neck' (Lacan 2007: 178) in the universe of commodities, then the first task is to undermine the specific illusion (particularly illusory in times of crisis) represented by commodity fetishism.

The gap between capitalist "ersatz" enjoyment and *jouissance* in its proper Lacanian connotation is the starting point of my analysis. There is an

insurmountable difference between the "imitation-*jouissance*" at work in capitalist ideology, and surplus-*jouissance* qua entropic leftover. Lacan argues that the shift from pre-capitalist to capitalist formations implied the attempt to internalize and re-invest the surplus inherent to work in its generalized signifying function, work as *savoir faire*. We go from a logic where waste is left to rot away, to one where it is counted and commodified; from a system that disavows the entropy related to knowledge-at-work, to one that re-signifies it, i.e. recycles it by transforming it into value. However, a look at today's world suggests that this entropic *jouissance* attached to work – to the basic, millenarian activity of human beings intervening on nature to improve their living conditions – cannot be recycled and valorized without producing more surplus-*jouissance*, more entropic waste of no value whatsoever. Lacan tells us that work itself is ultimately, in its deepest connotation, a function of surplus qua lack. If the capitalist utopia resides in converting all surplus into value, today we know this one thing, that *it does not work* – and it is from this knowledge that we should begin anew.

Chapter 2

# *Jouissance* at arm's length

The main problem concerning the rapport between *jouissance* and capitalism is to establish the extent to which we can speak of a potentially (self-) destructive "capitalist excess":

> The question here, however, is: does the capitalist injunction to enjoy in fact aim at soliciting *jouissance* in its excessive character, or are we ultimately, rather, dealing with a kind of universalized *pleasure principle*, with a life dedicated to pleasures? In other words, are not injunctions to have a good time, to acquire self-realization and self-fulfillment, and so on, precisely injunctions to *avoid* excessive *jouissance*, to find a kind of homeostatic balance? [. . .] The situation here is more complex: the problem is that, although the immediate and explicit injunction calls for the rule of the pleasure principle that would maintain homeostasis, the actual functioning of the injunction explodes these constraints into a striving towards excessive enjoyment. [. . .] Is it not all too easy to denounce *jouissance* offered on the market as "false", as providing only an empty package-promise with no substance? Is not the hole, the Void, at the heart of our pleasures the structure of every *jouissance*? Furthermore, do not the commodified provocations to enjoy which bombard us all the time push us toward, precisely, an autistic-masturbatory, "asocial" *jouissance* whose supreme case is drug addiction? Are drugs not at the same time the means for the most radical autistic experience of *jouissance* and a commodity *par excellence*? (Žižek 2006b: 310–11)

In a nutshell: does the commodification of life's inherent surplus function in accordance with the tempering effect of the pleasure principle, or can it lead to a breakdown? Žižek's answer is that the capitalist drive is ambiguous; it is impossible to predict the outcome of its reliance on the ideology of enjoyment. True, the injunction is constantly normalized, as in slogans like "enjoy . . . diet coke, beer without alcohol, fatless food", down to Žižek's

famous example of laxative chocolate;[1] however, it also stands for the pre-ontological excess of drive, a force which threatens to exceed capitalism's ability to reappropriate it. At the end of his 1933 article 'The Notion of Expenditure', Georges Bataille wrote: 'Men assure their own subsistence or avoid suffering, not because these functions themselves lead to a sufficient result, but in order to accede to the insubordinate function of free expenditure' (in Botting and Wilson 1997: 180–81). This reference to *insubordination* captures nicely Freud's "beyond the pleasure principle" (death-drive) which Žižek deems inseparable from the injunction to enjoy.

## The enjoyment parallax

When dealing with the "insubordination of capitalist enjoyment", however, we should be precise about its status and function. The idea that the capitalist drive may derail by itself is plausible but not sufficient, for it is all too evident that the Freudian insight into the excess of drive does not solicit investigations into how capital actually organizes its relation to surplus at the level of *production* and *circulation*. In this respect we could surmise that, if at the level of production we observe an impersonal, unpredictable and voracious *drive*, in circulation we are confronted with *desire* in relation to commodities.[2] This could prompt us to conclude that the capitalist drive belongs to production, where surplus-value is formed.[3] However, as we know from Marx, production and circulation belong together. In fact, I would argue that the truth about production (its drive) emerges retroactively, that is to say from the analysis of what happens in circulation. Lacan's insight is that in circulation we are left with the difference between the "recycled enjoyment" sold to consumers and the surplus-*jouissance* qua human waste generated as "collateral damage" by capitalist dynamics. The first point to highlight is that this surplus is both internal and external to capital, insofar as it is both the lack that secretly sustains commodity fetishism, and the "collateral" production of exclusion.

With regard to commodity enjoyment, Žižek is therefore right when he emphasizes that *every* enjoyment is structured around a lack, namely a paradoxical lack of enjoyment. Certainly in our times enjoyment implies the degradation of the subject to a consumer of "happiness pills". Lacan coined the enigmatic term *lathouse* (from the Greek words *léthé* – forgetting – and *aletheia* – truth), by which he meant those *pret-a-jouir* (ready-to-enjoy) objects of consumption produced by modern technology that sneakily come to occupy the place of *objet a*, the object-cause of desire:[4]

> The world is increasingly populated by lathouses. [. . .] And these tiny objects little *a* that you will encounter when you leave, there on the footpath at the corner of every street, behind every window, in this abundance of these objects designed to be the cause of your desire, insofar as it is now science that governs it – think of then as lathouses. I notice a bit late, since it's not long since I invented it, that it rhymes with *ventouse*. There is vent, "wind", inside, lots of wind, the wind of the human voice. [. . .] The lathouse has absolutely no reason to limit its multiplication. What is important is to know what happens when one really enters into relationship with the lathouse as such. (Lacan 2007: 162)

With specific reference to the enjoyment promoted by capital, however, the truth is that the entire capitalist venture counts on the fact that we *do not* enter into a real relationship with the *lathouse*, i.e. that we perceive enjoyment *not* as lack but as *fullness*, a ubiquitous substance that fills our lives and gives it meaning. Here we are faced by what we might call the "enjoyment parallax", with *parallax* naming the different aspect of the same object viewed from two different lines of sight. Although enjoyment in its deepest connotation is always a lack, we feed our social-symbolic order by perceiving it as fullness, in the sense that it colonizes every aspect of our lives. This split between lack and fullness is indeed constitutive of enjoyment. Theoretically speaking, then, it makes perfect sense to assert that the enjoyment offered on the market is ultimately *jouis-sans*, the void that structures desire. We can play all day with the thought that when we buy two items for the price of one, or toothpaste with 20 per cent extra free, we are actually confronted with the empty kernel of the commodity (see Žižek 2001b: 43). It is even amusing to think that when we break a Kinder egg we find nothing inside, or a stupid plastic toy equivalent to nothing (see Žižek 2003b: 145). Furthermore, it is a fact that the *plus-de-jouir* marketed by consumerism is directly connected with depressive affects, or what Freud called *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (the discontent in civilization): by giving in to the logic of consumption we effectively betray our desire and opt for the amassing of the "imitation enjoyment" prescribed by our *gourmand* superego, which can have devastating effects. The bottom line, however, is that we acquire meaning in our symbolic order only in direct relation with the anodyne *plus-de-jouir* embodied by the object-commodity in front of us (whether a real object or a life-experience). To problematize a potentially contemplative theoretical position, then, we should consider the extent to which our entire existence depends on the thrills, the little pleasures, of consuming arrays of ever-changing products, lifestyles and fashions, without which we

would feel humiliated and lost, deprived of the very framework in which meaning, for us, is created and inscribed. Here we must avoid all illusions and fully endorse Lacan's lesson on subjectivation: we exist insofar as we form our identity according to the dictates of the big Other of capital. Take our consumer identity away from us and we turn into barbarians overnight. Consequently, the pressing question is: what chances do we have to "become subjects" and take responsibility for our actions in the current regime of capitalist subjectivation?

It is obvious that to oppose capitalism requires more than a sentiment of irritation, frustration or rage. Perhaps it is less obvious that it requires our facing the unpleasant fact that despite all our well-meaning resistance and remonstrations, *our being coincides with our being consumers* – and that it is only thanks to our being consumers that the capitalist machine continues to thrive. Relegating the question of consumption to a secondary problem, as in much of contemporary radical theory, is therefore deleterious. The type of revolutionary politics theorized today by a number of Italian philosophers and activists coming from various experiences within the extra-parliamentary left during the 1960s and 1970s, offers itself as an interesting example of this attitude. In its Deleuzian endorsement of desire and libidinal affects, this politics, in my view, fails to identify and oppose the ideological core of late capitalism. Here is an emblematic passage from Michael Hardt:

> What is perhaps most attractive about these Italian theorists and the movements they grow out of is their joyful character. [. . .] Here [. . .] the collective pursuit of pleasures is always in the forefront – revolution is a desiring-machine. Perhaps this is why, although these authors follow many aspects of Marx's work, they seldom develop either the critique of the commodity or the critique of ideology as a major theme. Although certainly important projects, both of these analyses run the risk of falling into a kind of asceticism that would predicate revolutionary struggle on a denial of the pleasures offered by capitalist society. The path we find here, in contrast, involves no such denial, but rather the adoption and appropriation of the pleasures of capitalist society as our own, intensifying them as a shared collective wealth. (in Virno and Hardt 1996: 6–7)

The conclusion of *Empire* is in this sense equally instructive. There, Hardt and Negri invoke St Francis of Assisi's '*joy of being*' against '*the misery of power*'. The revolution they envisage '*is a revolution that no power will control – because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love,*

*simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist*' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 413). How to object to such an idyllic picture? Perhaps by stating that, while a psychoanalytically indebted ideology critique of the capitalist "will to enjoyment" is certainly not predicated on asceticism, denial or poverty (though neither on Bohemianism, for that matter), it nevertheless regards consumerism as a nodal point of contention. If autonomy and subtraction from the capitalist mode of production is a necessary prerequisite for radical change, as Hardt, Negri and other Italian theorists claim, surely this subtraction must also take place at the level of consumption, i.e. against the logic of commodity fetishism, for otherwise the very first step would be compromised. In other words, to be effective the refusal to work according to capitalist guidelines must be supplemented by the refusal to pursuit capitalist pleasures in the *form* of commodities, for it is in this pursuit that (a) capital enjoys itself by closing its cycle and realizing its potential; and (b) we enjoy capital via unconscious libidinal attachments.

The simple lesson to learn is that the madness of the capitalist drive, its constitutive imbalance that cuts across different historical epochs and superstructures, is not only fed but also offset by the "fetishistic common sense" of consumer demands masqueraded as desire. This is how our symbolic order manages to retain its overall balance. Despite its cyclical crises, the capitalist drive preserves its relative sanity because we placidly enjoy and fetishize its fruits, pretending not to notice the apocalyptic consequences of our actions. And, it must be added, we enjoy its fruits because they seem to neutralize the excess of our lives. Consuming is therapeutic, which is why it is not enough to state that the ambiguity of the capitalist drive may by itself usher in the demise of the system. Furthermore, there are always other stabilizing forces that are ready at hand to cure capitalist turbulence, from religion and tradition to welfarism. The truth is that unless we find a way to radically intervene in the situation, the drive of capital, despite its cyclical derailments and constitutive instability, will always tend to readjust itself by counting on its faithful army of consumers, who are willing to embrace any cause (such as the ecology, branded by Žižek as 'the new opium of the masses')[5] in exchange for the illusory homeostatic balance that derives from the act of consumption. Existential angst remains the main motivator behind consumerism and therefore capitalist production, despite the fact that it produces nothing but angst – for which, in any case, one can always rely on the thriving pharmaceutical market. As angst-ridden consumers, we enjoy by keeping *jouissance* at arm's length. And as for the jolts of "excessive *jouissance*" we are allowed, even encouraged to experience (drugs, for

instance), it is easy to see how their consumption is regulated by the market in advance, insofar as the market depoliticizes it, constantly re-inscribing it into a logic where what reigns supreme is our internalized striving towards a healthy, balanced enjoyment supervised by the big Other. Herbert Marcuse's old and forgotten notion of "repressive desublimation" has never been more tangibly at work than in today's global capitalism (see Marcuse 1964: 56–83).

The injunction to enjoy is thus kept under surveillance by market forces. It operates within the framework of a "controlled", regimented enjoyment that has been at the heart of capitalism since its Puritan beginnings. Excess must be perceived as available everywhere, while it is simultaneously depoliticized, criminalized, deprived of its disturbing sting. Ultimately the market behind today's "cultural capitalism", like the culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer, is at the same time 'pornographic and prudish' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 140). We are egged on to experience all kinds of excessive pleasures, but only insofar as they already contain their own antibodies.

In *Seminar XVI*, Lacan had already noted that although the reinvestment of profits 'does not put the means of production at the service of pleasure', we nevertheless end up with a 'practice of pleasure'. In fact, this practice is enforced on us and at the same time must be experienced as the result of our spontaneous yearning, so as to prevent 'the sovereign pleasure of contemplative *far niente*'. The decisive claim here is that the success of the pleasure principle must be measured against its power to intervene 'in the catacombs', 'in the underground *Acheronta*', namely in our unconscious. Any access to enjoyment, Lacan reminds us, takes place through the complex topology of the subject. This to say that no matter how excessive and potentially destabilizing our experience of capitalist enjoyment is, it still falls under the tempering jurisdiction of the pleasure principle, which is 'careful that there is not too much heat in the wheels'. Although we aim right at the heart of enjoyment, all we can hope for are 'practices of recuperation'. Moreover, precisely in preventing what Horace had called *otium cum dignitate*, the dignified subtraction from the imperative to work, capitalist hedonism proves all the more coercive (see *Seminar XVI*, 15 March 1969). In brief, capital intervenes in the battle between the pleasure principle and its beyond by relentlessly converting the latter back into the former – which explains why, for instance, the injunction to enjoy is today primarily marketed as "enjoy responsibly" and "enjoy wellbeing", i.e. "enjoy without enjoyment". The upshot is more likely to be a "generalised degeneration" than a real (political) opening. As Lacan told the students, their 'taking the

floor' during May '68 was more akin to 'taking tobacco or coke' than 'the taking of any particular Bastille' (*Seminar XVI*, 20 November 1968). And as Alain Badiou has put it with his inimitable polemical verve, the triumph of hedonism is always an indicator of obscenity and atrocity:

> The imperative "Enjoy!", which we see plastered all over teen magazines today, both retains and aggravates the structures synthesized by the imperative "Don't Enjoy!". [. . .] Ever since the days of the Roman Empire, we know that when enjoyment is what every life tries to guarantee for itself, when it takes the place of the imperative, what one inevitably ends up enjoying is atrocity. Enter the time of general obscenity, of gladiators, of real-time torture, a time that might even make us nostalgic for the political slaughters of the dead century. (Badiou 2007a: 79–80)

The ultimate figure for this kind of "late Roman Empire" degeneration and debauchery, the type described by Federico Fellini in his film *Satyricon* (1969),[6] is of course Silvio Berlusconi, who from this angle perfectly incarnates the late capitalist appropriation of the '68 theme of sexual liberation. Apart from the businesslike matter-of-factness with which he numbs and startles his audiences,[7] Berlusconi the Prime Minister explicitly and shamelessly endorses hedonism: women, sex and his own wellbeing are effectively his favourite topics at meetings and political rallies. Indeed, he must be thoroughly "liberated" to speak so openly about his penchant for surrounding himself with beautiful young women and the difficulties this natural inclination has caused to his marriage. With Berlusconi we have an overt identification with libidinal excesses amalgamated with, and mitigated by, the bio-political, late-Foucauldian, narcissistic emphasis on *cura sui* (care of the self): he sells himself as both an indefatigable womanizer and someone who is deeply concerned with his own wellbeing (hair transplants, cosmetic surgery, diets, medical research into prolonging life and so on). In this recipe we find the truth about the late capitalist injunction to enjoy, insofar as it is addressed to all of us. At the same time, it is precisely his identification with enjoyment that secures him political success in our alleged post-ideological age. What makes him and the model he represents unassailable is the fact that he already embodies, in his public persona, his own (gentrified) excess, an image of transgression with which he nonchalantly invites "the people" to identify. He represents commodified politics at its purest, which is why it is both very easy and ultimately impossible to attack him by making fun of him: *he already is his own caricature*. As Žižek has recently put it, however, the point not to forget is that 'behind the clownish

mask there is a state power that functions with ruthless efficiency. Perhaps by laughing at Berlusconi we are already playing his game' (Žižek 2009b). Behind the joker's mask there is the ugly face of an openly authoritarian capitalism, rapidly travelling across the globe.

## Žižek with Sohn-Rethel

In light of the above discussion, any attempt to reinvent relations of production and consumption, and with it the very meaning of our existence, has first to break the deadlock concerning what we have called the "enjoyment parallax", which, like every parallax, involves an illusion related to the perception of a given object. The illusory mechanism at the heart of our experience as consumers is what Žižek renders with the phrase "fetishistic disavowal". He claims that the cynical postmodern subject of global capitalism is actually a believer, unwittingly caught in an ideological mechanism. In fact, capitalist ideology is stronger than any other preceding ideology because it disavows belief, transferring it onto the fetish-commodity: the commodities, in their mad dance, "do the believing" for us, while we carry on in a sober context of freedom of choice. While knowledge is on the side of the I, belief is a function of the other.

Marx had already noticed how in the passage from feudalism to capitalism and the establishment of bourgeois society, the explicit character of social domination and servitude between human beings was suddenly repressed, only however to re-emerge in the form of commodity fetishism. With the advent of capitalism human beings started perceiving themselves as free and independent subjects, emancipated from the fetishistic type of inter-subjective relations characteristic of feudalism (master and servant, etc.). However, class domination did not simply disappear but rather *returned* in the disavowed mode of fetishistic relations between things. Under capitalist conditions, commodities materialize the repressed truth of reified human relations.[8] In some of the most inspired pages of *Capital*, often quoted by Žižek, Marx argues that the commodity – 'a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (Marx 1990: 163) – embodies in its form the relations of domination which men mistakenly believe they have freed themselves from:

> It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves that assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty

> realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx 1990: 165)

The amount of class exploitation necessary for the production of commodities is thus displaced and congealed in the mystical, irrational quality possessed by commodities, insofar as they 'enter into relations both with each other and with the human race'. A fundamental displacement occurs in the way we relate to objects, and in the way we look at objects relating with themselves, to the extent that in modernity religion lives on mainly in the form of commodity fetishism: the market is effectively what "keeps us together". This famous Marxian notion must be taken literally, for in today's postmodern capitalism 'fetishism itself is commodified', as for instance in certain Japanese vending machines where one can buy, alongside cans of light drinks and packaged foods, also 'panties guaranteed to have been worn by young girls' (Žižek 2002a: 286). More to the point, for this fetishism to take place human beings have to perceive themselves as rational, secular individuals freely interrelating and equal in the eyes of the law (Žižek 1989: 25). Our blind attachment to commodities (first and foremost money) embodies all that is ideological and mistaken about our bourgeois understanding of freedom: 'In this precise sense, money is for Marx a fetish: I pretend to be a rational, utilitarian subject, well aware how things truly stand – but I embody my disavowed belief in the money-fetish' (Žižek 2001a: 14).

Žižek agrees with Alfred Sohn-Rethel that the *form* of the commodity holds the key to the critique not only of political economy, but also, more generally, of the abstract mode of thinking which emerged with the division of intellectual and manual labour. Put differently, in the commodity we find the formula of the Kantian transcendental subject, for we gain an insight into the crucial epistemological displacement through which objective knowledge, or the abstract intellect, historically emerged. Sohn-Rethel's notion of "real abstraction" sums up the measure of our blindness to the fact that objective knowledge (related to the scientific or university discourse of which Lacan speaks) is sustained by our fetishistic relation to commodities. The action of commodity exchange, Sohn-Rethel argues, is fetishistic insofar as it is *an abstract act of practical solipsism*, which in one and the same move establishes the general social framework and allows the

exchanging agents to develop a private consciousness based on the division of manual and intellectual labour: 'What enables commodity exchange to perform its socialising function – to effect the social synthesis – is its abstractness from everything relating to use' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 29–30). Or, more comprehensively put: 'The unvarying formal features of exchange [. . .] constitute a mechanism of real abstraction indispensable for the social synthesis throughout and supplying a matrix for the abstract conceptual reasoning characteristic of all societies based on commodity production' (51). In Žižek's words, which emphasize the unconscious dimension of our practical involvement in commodity exchange, 'the social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality *whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants*' (Žižek 1989: 20–1). Marx had already stated that commodity exchange, insofar as it is practiced as an exchange of values, is sustained by the repressed knowledge that it actually involves the equation of 'different kinds of labour as human labour'. As he succinctly put it: 'They do this without being aware of it' (Marx 1990: 166–67). The action of exchange takes place in a kind of timeless and spaceless vacuum where we perform our gestures blindly, like automatons – which confirms Marx's insight that it is the movement of the commodities, their "mad dance", that, being beyond our control, controls us.

Sohn-Rethel's thesis that our liberal concept of freedom had to affirm itself, historically, in concomitance with the emergence of intellectual abstraction and commodity exchange, is worth further attention. Its basic claim is that bourgeois freedom and commodity fetishism are deeply connected phenomena, two sides of the same coin. What commodity fetishism makes manifest is that bourgeois freedom equals exploitation (of the owner of the means of production over the worker) or, which is the same thing, enslavement (of the worker who freely sells his labour to the owner of the means of production). In psychoanalytic terms, this means that our blind attachment to commodities represents the symptom of our freedom, that is to say, the truth about our unfreedom. In describing the self-destructive character of the Enlightenment project, Adorno came to the same conclusion, though he blamed instrumental reason. Just like Sohn-Rethel (with whom he held an extensive correspondence), Adorno argued that the old struggle for emancipation from myth, or fetishistic relations between people, eventually engendered nothing but a relapse in the sophisticated mythology of the administered society. The crucial difference is that Adorno, and the Frankfurt School in general, tended (to my mind problematically)

to subsume the critique of capitalism within the wider critique of instrumental rationality, thereby failing to locate in the enigma of the commodity the cause of the paradigm shift towards objectivity and the scientific discourse. It is not that the domination implicit in exchange confirms the tendencies already inscribed in the Enlightenment; rather, those tendencies (the false universality of instrumental reason, the domination of nature, etc.) emerged *with* the capitalist mode of production and circulation.

## On the belief of the commodity

Going back to the argument against Marx's faith in the potential of the forces of production to outgrow relations of production, we should note that through his fascination for the commodity, the worker "forgets" that he has been exploited to produce it – which goes a long way to explain why workers' movements as a rule have stopped short of the revolution. At this level even someone like Keynes might be helpful, for instance when he states that 'the expectation of consumption is the only *raison d'être* of employment' (Keynes 2008: 135) – the anti-Keynesian point being that capitalist development does not possess in itself an emancipatory potential; it rather moves towards further assimilation and domination thanks to increasingly sophisticated dynamics of expansion through containment.

As for the commodities, according to Marx once they emerge they acquire a magical aura through which they keep us under their spell: 'Their own [human beings as "exchangers" of commodities] movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them' (Marx 1990: 167–68). The paradox is the one Lacan hinted at throughout *Seminar XVII*: by enjoying commodities, *we are in fact enjoyed by them*, just as by speaking we are spoken by language. Commodities represent a powerful ideological force precisely because they hold the key to the unconscious, which is the place where the cause of our being is located. This is why commodity fetishism, belief and ideology are profoundly interrelated categories: capitalist ideology ultimately functions by displacing belief onto the commodity. The classic example employed by Žižek is canned laughter. By incorporating laughter, the TV set (the commodity) relieves us of the necessity to consciously identify with what we watch, and, precisely through this disavowal, it allows us to enjoy and relax, thus preparing us for more work. We obey our socio-symbolic order through dis-identification, since the TV-commodity "does the believing" for us. This also confirms Adorno and Horkheimer's

insight that relief from work is nothing but the prolongation of work;[9] and, more pointedly, that '[t]he triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 167).

Žižek's joke about the ignorance of the chicken is equally instructive. After a patient has been cured of his obsession with being a grain of seed, he nevertheless returns to the doctor asking, in a fit of panic: "Of course *I* know that I'm a human being, but does the chicken?" (see Žižek 2006b: 351). The insight of the patient is correct: no matter how wise and knowledgeable we become, the chicken-commodity will still get us. As Marx hinted at, it is not enough to demystify the commodity by showing that it is merely an ordinary object embodying reified social relations; the point is that even after we know what producing commodities entails (in terms of exploitation), they still appear to us as uncanny magical objects – i.e., they still control us. 'If commodities could speak' Marx famously claimed, 'they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. [. . .] We relate to each other merely as exchange-values' (Marx 1990: 176–77). So the bottom line is that the moment we enter our social link, we cannot avoid fetishizing the commodity, regardless of how much knowledge we have acquired. Knowledge itself is not enough. Consequently, 'the real task is to convince not the subject, but the chicken-commodities: not to change the way we talk about commodities, but *to change the way commodities talk among themselves*' (Žižek 2006b: 352). To "beat" commodity fetishism we must disturb the belief of the commodities. What can this mean? Ultimately, that we need to find a way to intervene on our belief insofar as it remains detached, unavailable to our conscious knowledge. The key ideological battle is fought not on what we consciously believe in (or do not believe in), but on the plane of disavowed beliefs. What has to change is the substance of our "belief by proxy": the way in which we unconsciously displace belief onto the other qua commodity, thereby ignoring that this other has always-already colonized our unconscious, and thus it has become *the cause of what we are*. The task ahead, then, is to invent a new relation to the disavowed substance of our belief, which, of course, must follow our subtraction from or disengagement with commodity fetishism. For the paradoxical statement that commodities "do the believing for us" means that they have hooked us at the level of surplus-*jouissance*; hence my argument that there is a crucial gap between our conscious enjoyment of the commodity (which falls under the jurisdiction of the pleasure principle) and the way the commodity *enjoys us* (commodity fetishism proper). Only the latter can be said to represent our lack towards enjoyment, namely surplus-

*jouissance*, and therefore the only point from which we can subtract and begin anew. It is the traumatic encounter with our passive objectification vis-à-vis the circulation of commodities that, alone, can provide for us an image of salvation.

But let us return to the main question under scrutiny here, which is the Žižekian thesis that today *disbelief has become a category of belief*, in the precise sense that by "seeing through" the commodities we exercise the very faculty of "objective knowledge" which at the same time delivers us back to the unconscious practice of commodity fetishism. To repeat Sohn-Rethel, the commodity's arrival on the grand scene of history coincides with the sharp separation of manual and intellectual labour and the constitution of a priori categories of thought, which in turn facilitates our unconscious yielding to what the market puts on display for us. This short-circuiting correlation between the emergence of transcendental subjectivity and commodity fetishism is key if we are to comprehend the basic framework of our societies, and can be appreciated apropos every aspect of our lives: the more we pride ourselves on possessing the capacity to exercise autonomous intellectual judgements, the more we blindly deliver ourselves to the fetishistic logic of commodity exchange. What should not be missed is that it is the form of the commodity – which Marx had linked, in a footnote of *Capital*, to '*femmes folles de leur corps*' [10] – that explains what the modern subject is about.

More generally, Žižek alerts us to the basic ruse of ideology, which has only become chronically evident with capitalism: our distance from official ideological messages, our self-righteous cynicism, is actually what delivers us to the ideological machine of capital, for our prudence and independence of thought is counterbalanced by "what we do" in our everyday lives. As he puts it, borrowing from Sohn-Rethel, we are fetishists *in practice*, not in theory: our reliance on common sense masks the fact that we are constantly duped by the commodities. Marx was therefore fully entitled to speak of "commodity metaphysics". Our condition is one where instead of idealizing through knowledge, we idealize through fetishism – literally, without knowing what we are doing. More than ever before, belief today is externalized, embodied in our blind practices of consumption.[11]

The destiny of enjoyment under capitalism had already been identified, *in nuce*, by Alexis de Tocqueville in the chapter of *Democracy in America* entitled 'Peculiar Effects of the Love of Physical Gratifications in Democratic Times'. Here, Tocqueville reflects on the difference between the aristocratic striving after disproportionate enjoyment and debauchery, and the democratic restraint in matters of enjoyment: in democracy, people 'gratify a number of petty desires without indulging in any irregularities of passion;

thus they are more apt to become enervated than debauched' (Tocqueville 1998: 238). What if this description of democratic-cum-capitalistic pleasure principle is still valid today, despite its seemingly outdated thesis? Far from indicating the potential explosion of capitalist dynamics, the unabashed commodification of enjoyment that typifies consumer society springs from the necessity to maximize capitalist productivity through the enervation of consumers in times when explicit ideological calls have lost their seductive power. As such, this injunction to enjoy has always been the driving motor of capitalism, even when other ideological forces were at work. Tocqueville concludes his short chapter thus:

> The reproach I address to the principle of equality is not that it leads men away in the pursuit of forbidden enjoyments, but that it absorbs them wholly in quest of those which are allowed. By these means a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world, which would not corrupt, but enervate, the soul and noiselessly unbend its spring of action. (239)

Tocqueville had clearly identified how the combined efforts of liberal democracy and capitalism result in the biopolitical regulation of life and consumer apathy. We are still there today. Michel Foucault wrote that the motto of liberalism is 'live dangerously', meaning that 'individuals are constantly exposed to danger, or rather, they are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, their future as containing danger' (Foucault 2008: 66). This is what Žižek refers to as today's post-politics, or "politics of fear". We detect an interesting homology with the capitalist injunction to enjoy here, for what the reminder of danger actually translates as is "avoid real enjoyment, avoid the symptoms, avoid risking the collapse of the universe that allows you to enjoy in moderation!" Capitalist enjoyment thus appears as a prescribed alteration of our libidinal economy which unduly pretends to be what it is not, i.e. a liberating fix, a promise of *jouissance* freed from the constraints of the law. Adorno and Horkheimer were once again right in commenting on the ersatz-character of the enjoyment offered by the culture industry:

> The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises [. . .]; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 139)

What they did not realize, however – a fact marking their distance from Lacan and Žižek – is that "beyond the menu" there is neither real pleasure nor a utopian, unreachable light, but instead the unbearable awareness of our *jouissance*, our lack towards enjoyment. The light at the end of the tunnel, as Žižek has recently put it,[12] is more likely to be the light of the train that comes towards us. What this implies is my initial point that surplus-*jouissance* is always at least minimally traumatic, and only as such liberating. The question is how to locate this *jouissance* and, most importantly, bring it about.

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Chapter 3

# From surplus-value to surplus-*jouissance*

As is well known, in Marx surplus-value originates in unpaid surplus labour – it is indeed the capitalist form of surplus labour. In the *Grundrisse* we read: 'To begin with: capital forces the workers beyond necessary labour to surplus labour. Only in this way does it realize itself, and create surplus value' (Marx 1993: 421). Here is a similarly familiar passage from *Capital*:

> During one period, the worker produces a value that is only equal to the value of his labour-power, i.e. he produces its equivalent. Thus the capitalist receives, in return for advancing the price of the labour-power, a product of the same price. It is the same as if he had bought the product ready-made in the market. During the other period, the period of surplus-labour, the utilization of labour-power creates a value for the capitalist without costing him any value in return. He is thus able to set labour-power in motion without paying for it. It is in this sense that surplus labour can be called unpaid labour. Capital, therefore, is not only the command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour. All surplus-value, whatever particular form (profit, interest or rent) it may subsequently crystallize into, is in substance the materialization of unpaid labour. The secret of the self-valorization of capital resolves itself into the fact that it has at its disposal a definite quantity of the unpaid labour of other people. (Marx 1990: 671–72)

Let us first point out that Marx refers to the value of the worker's *labour-power*. What the worker sells is his labour-power, his capacity to work. Capital transforms labour-power into a commodity with a specific exchange-value, just like any other commodity. This value corresponds to 'the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence' (Marx 1990: 276), in other words to the value of the goods needed by the worker to perform his task as required. However, while using labour-power, the capitalist extracts from it also a new value, which exceeds the value of the purchased labour-power.

This value surreptitiously extracted from the worker is surplus-value; as such it stems from the expropriation of surplus-labour, which is in excess of the purchased labour-power. In sum, Marx's surplus-value represents the valorization of a surplus which originally belongs to labour-power qua commodity, but which the capitalist has not paid for: 'Half the working day costs capital *nothing*; it thus obtains a value for which it has given no equivalent. [. . .] Surplus value in general is value in excess of the equivalent' (Marx 1993: 324). The object of Marx's critique is the relentless extraction of surplus-value from labour-power:

> Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus-value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital. [. . .] To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune. (Marx 1990: 644)

Describing the transformation of non-capitalist into capitalist production, in *Capital* as well as in preparatory manuscripts such as the *Grundrisse*, Marx shows how the goal of capitalism is not the production of goods but the augmenting of capital. While the labour process creates use-values (goods), the whole system depends on and is aimed at the valorization process, which culminates in the appropriation of surplus-value as net income.[1] Marx understood very clearly that because of its structural constitution – the unique way in which production is linked to the extraction and re-investment of surplus-value – capitalism can only be geared towards accumulation, and not the satisfaction of human needs. This is the basic point that needs to be re-politicized today.

## The surplus of labour

Marx's key advance with respect to the bourgeois political economists that preceded him (Adam Smith, Ricardo, etc.) concerns the insight into the specific configuration of the commodity which transforms money into capital, i.e. labour. It is this insight that persuades us to develop the connection with Lacan. Already in the *Grundrisse* Marx defines labour-power as something that exists 'in potentiality' as the worker's 'vitality', his *labouring*

*capacity* as a living being (Marx 1993: 267). He states unequivocally that expropriation of labour-power means essentially not paying for the *quality* of labour-as-such rather than for its quantity, namely for labour as a non-measurable entity, 'for the fact that *labour, as labour, is labour*' (359). This tautological quality of labour that the worker surrenders to the capitalist, 'like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage', is nothing other than labour's '*creative power*' (307). If, then, '[t]he great historic quality of capital is to *create* this *surplus labour*, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence' (325), we ought to think it alongside a surplus which, before becoming value, is human surplus, an excess inseparable from human activity as such. In Chapter 6 of volume 1 of *Capital* Marx returns to this question with renewed conviction:

> We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind. (Marx 1990: 270)

Capital's capacity to generate in the worker the need to produce more than necessary, forcing him over the centuries to identify with a type of industriousness rooted in his own (expropriated) surplus-labour, calls directly into question the ontological quality of surplus insofar as it belongs to human activity *tout court*.

It was Lacan who attempted to develop this decisive observation by proposing the homology between surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance*. My initial contention, largely unexplored by commentators, is that Marx's surplus-labour is already, in itself, coterminous with Lacan's surplus-*jouissance*, for it not only refers to the worker's unpaid labour-time, but also to the excessive, incalculable quality of labour-as-such. Marx, however, did not develop this intuition. Instead, he stopped at surplus labour-time, conceptualizing it as potentially detachable from surplus-value and directly available to the workers who, in a communist economy, would use it for the good of the whole of society. From Lacan's perspective, then, Marx's "reduction" of labour-as-such to labour-time corresponds to abstracting the former from its real dimension. As we shall see, this is also where today's partisans of a positive biopolitics stop, insofar as they base their Marxism in the re-appropriation of surplus labour-time. Lacan's suggestion, by contrast, is that the genesis of surplus-value – this invisible turbine at the heart of capitalist appropriation and accumulation – should be conceived less as a supplementary lapse of non-remunerated labour-time than as the entropic and

non-quantifiable quality intrinsic to labour-as-such. If the labour-power offered by the free worker on the market, as Marx put it, 'exists only as an ability, a capacity [*Vermögen*] of his bodily existence', and 'has no existence apart from that' (Marx 1993: 282), it is precisely as an amorphous and intrinsically "virtual" power lacking presence that we should associate it with the entropic Real of *jouissance*.

This reasoning may seem far-fetched or simply impractical. Nevertheless, the thesis I am advancing here is that the historical success of capitalism as an economic as well as socially synthetic system ultimately depends on what we might call, resorting again to the fortunate image popularized by Žižek, the parallax between surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance*: a minimal shift of perspective reveals that what we perceive as value is actually, in its deepest connotation, the inerasable lack at the heart of being from which the little *a* emerges, this thing "in us more than ourselves"[2] that bothers us from the moment we enter the social link to the moment we relinquish our ties with it. Today's global incorporation and valorization of this constitutively human surplus corresponds to an unprecedented attempt to construct a social order on an act of recycling, for what we are sold as desirable value is the end product of the invisible conversion of surplus-*jouissance* into enjoyment. We should not be deceived by the recent turn towards "green business": recycling was at the heart of capitalism since its inception.

So Lacan claims that the unpaid surplus-labour turned by the capitalist into surplus-value is homologous to surplus-*jouissance*. Marx's *Mehrwert*, he avers, is actually *Mehrlust*: the principal aim of *Seminar XVII* is to harness surplus-value to its foundation in the Real of *jouissance*. From the viewpoint of what Lacan calls 'our psychoanalytic belvedere' (Lacan 2007: 79), surplus-value is homologous to surplus-*jouissance* insofar as it stands for the specious valorization of the entropic surplus of labour. As Alenka Zupančič puts it: 'There is something in the status of work (or labor) which is identical to the status of enjoyment, namely, that it essentially appears as entropy, as loss, or as an unaccounted-for surplus (by-product) of signifying operations' (Zupančič 2006: 162).

## The opacity of knowledge

At this stage, our analysis should explore the conflation of knowledge and work in conjunction with *jouissance*. We cannot overlook how the surplus Lacan refers to is inseparable from the knowledge-at-work originally (in pre-capitalist times) possessed and performed by the slave. The knowledge

in question is not merely "work", i.e. it does not simply coincide with skills we can describe, learn and put to work. Rather, it has to do with the fact that 'getting to know something always happens in a flash' (*Seminar XVI*, 26 February 1969). As children discover through experience, knowledge is unconscious before being pedagogical: without knowing why, things, or the objects children play with, all of a sudden "start making sense", and from that revelation a piece of conscious knowledge is produced (see also Agamben 2007). This is how knowledge-at-work, *savoir faire*, is originally related to what it lacks. It is this opaque (unconscious) kernel of knowledge that is therefore intimately related to surplus-*jouissance*, and as such can be legitimately regarded as the invisible matrix of any "performed knowledge". This is why to know something, to have learnt our way around in a certain field (*savoir faire*, know-how), always means that, without knowing it, we are 'within the horizon of the sexual' (5 March 1969), that is, at the mercy of the unconscious from which surplus-enjoyment emerges, together with *objet a* and the articulation of desire.

Capitalism latches on to this opaque kernel of knowledge with a view to integrate it into the circuit of value and, eventually, reproduce it as enjoyment, albeit "at arm's length" – so that, as Lacan notices, nobody realizes anymore that 'the surplus *jouissance* that the slave brings us lies within arm's reach' (Lacan 2007: 175). It is clear, then, that the ruse of capitalism embodied by the mystical quality of the commodity that enjoins us to enjoy, originally implies the conversion of the surplus of *jouissance* into surplus-value. As Lacan warns us at the beginning of *Seminar XVI* (27 November 1968), we should not confuse homology with analogy. Rather than just stressing their structural similarity, we should connect surplus-value with its invisible matrix in the awareness that it is the same thing that is at stake, namely 'the scissors' mark of discourse'. Surplus-*jouissance* – though camouflaged and, as it were, epistemologically violated – is what is at stake in surplus-value, and it is precisely this minimal difference that allows us to make sense of the enjoyment parallax at the level of circulation (the difference between our enjoyment of commodities and the commodities' enjoyment of us). Marx's oversight – which, as Lacan was quick to note, did not prevent him from designating the 'function of surplus value [. . .] with complete pertinence in its devastating consequences' – was that he focused all too quickly on surplus-value, neglecting 'the initial stage of its articulation'. Consequently, he drew the wrong conclusions. In Lacan's words: 'It's not because one nationalizes the means of production at the level of socialism in one country that one has thereby done away with surplus value, if one doesn't know what it is' (Lacan 2007: 107–08). Without meaning to move away from

Marx's critical orbit, we should nevertheless remind ourselves that his theories are driven by the idea that human beings act in full consciousness of themselves, their conscious motivations determining historical progress. Lacan's observations on Marx spring precisely from the (inevitable) absence in his work of considerations not only regarding psychological factors, but more importantly the unconscious origin and weight of any knowledge. While these observations can hardly be imputed to a philosopher of the Victorian period, they should be kept firmly in mind when attempting to resurrect Marx in the XXI century.

But let us go back to capital's original act of vampirism: the first waged worker's surplus-*jouissance*, consubstantial with the opaqueness of his knowledge-at-work, is surreptitiously "sucked out" of him, converted into value, and eventually "injected" into the produced commodity later purchased by that very worker, who with this act sanctions his integration in the closed system of valorized enjoyment. It is Lacan's notion of the signifier that discloses the intrinsic limitation of Marx's discovery: the unpaid labour-power responsible for the creation of surplus-value is ultimately nothing but the constitutive, non-symbolizable libidinal surplus that accompanies any intervention of the signifier, that is to say of any knowledge. Why? Because knowledge by definition *strikes on the wall of its lack* (of knowledge), its limit, thereby secreting an entropic addendum, i.e. a measure of libidinal energy *which is not available to perform work*. This is surplus-*jouissance*, whose presence proves that an unconscious knowledge is, literally, at work. As Lacan repeats throughout *Seminar XVII*, '[t]he key lies in raising the question of what *jouissance* is' (Lacan 2007: 176). More precisely:

> What is important is that, whether natural or not, it is well and truly as bound to the very origin of the signifier's coming into play that it is possible to speak of *jouissance*. Nobody will ever know anything about what the oyster or the beaver enjoys, because, in the absence of the signifier, there is no distance between *jouissance* and the body. (177)

Everything hinges on the dialectic of knowledge and *jouissance*, for the surplus of *jouissance* (qua lack) is correlated to the arrival on the scene of the signifier. Language therefore 'institutes the order of discourse' but simultaneously 'it does bring us something extra' (177). When Lacan claims that knowledge is a means of *jouissance* he explains that when at work, knowledge produces entropy, a point of loss, which is 'the sole regular point at which we have access to the nature of *jouissance*. This is what the effect the signifier has upon the fate of the speaking being translates into, culminates

in, and is motivated by' (50–1). Insofar as it overlaps with entropy, surplus-*jouissance* has no use-value: it is waste, a quantity of libido *that is both produced by and lost to any working activity*,[3] for we cannot gain control over it – it remains other.

We must clarify that, strictly speaking, we do not have *jouissance* in addition to the signifier, but as the very impasse consubstantial with the signifier: 'Anything that is language only obtains *jouissance* by insisting to the point of producing the loss whereby surplus *jouissance* takes body' (124). *Jouissance* per se is a mythical entity, while surplus-*jouissance* is the libido materializing the loss that emerges from this myth – which means that whenever we speak of *jouissance* we refer to a surplus that can only be given as entropy, a plus that, as it were, coincides with a minus; and that for this reason *it cannot perform any work*. Put differently, we could say that since knowledge, for Lacan, is enveloped in unconscious knowledge, it necessarily engenders a surplus which is always-already lost, thus establishing for the subject a 'dialectic of frustration' (19) as well as the prospect of anxiety (147). No wonder Lacan defines the unary trait itself (Freud's *einziger Zug*), the basic signifier that allows for identification to take place, in Heideggerian terms, as 'a mark toward death', since 'nothing takes on any meaning except when death comes into play' (177). What is more is that if the letter (the signifier) kills, meaning emerges through the displacement of *jouissance* onto the other, which is, for Žižek, the mechanism at the heart of any form of racism.[4]

Apropos this other, what I have argued so far suggests that the founding category of capitalism (surplus-value qua surplus-*jouissance*) can indeed be seen in terms of otherness, insofar as the *camouflaging of otherness* is the key ideological operation performed by capital, something we could also refer to as an operation of cultural commodification:

> The capitalist production (also in its social dimension) is a constant production of otherness, and a capitalist valorization of this otherness, of its transformation into value. Capitalism is a major producer of differences, as well as a major leveler or equalizer of these same differences. That is what makes it the greatest promoter of liberalism and of all kinds of liberties and rights (especially the right to be different), and the greatest deactivator of any real liberating or subversive potential of these differences. (Zupančič 2006: 174)

In this respect, we should unashamedly introduce a hiatus between *true* and *false* otherness. To use Alain Badiou's terms, the objective status of truths – of truths which therefore *appear* in the world – depends on the fact that

'a truth is an exception to what there is' (Badiou 2009a: 6). More precisely, a truth exists objectively and ontologically as an exception to 'that which makes up the structure of worlds', i.e. to 'a mixture of bodies and languages' (4). Translating this in Lacanese, we may add that the truth embodied by surplus-*jouissance* is validated by its exceptional character with respect to the mere interaction of bodies and languages, which in capitalist times is subsumed under the category "value". The main problem with today's Cultural Studies – and more generally with what Badiou caustically calls the "democratic materialism" of our times – is that it relativizes otherness to the point of reducing it to a value, a mere relation of bodies and languages, thus playing in the hands of the capitalist machine. Let us remember that *touching the truth*, in Lacan, implies formulating a *mi-dire*, a half-saying, which does not imply that beyond this half there is some unreachable hidden substance. We should not transcendentalize Lacan's notion of truth. Rather, he suggests that beyond this half there is, literally, nothing – a nothing, however, which is given to experience as *plus-de-jouir*. Apropos "experience", Giorgio Agamben is right when, following Walter Benjamin, he proposes that one of the ciphers of our modern malady is the 'destruction of experience' (see Agamben 2007). When all experiences become visible, legible and exchangeable *as value*, we should know that we have forsaken truth intended as the surplus-of-sense originally available to the child. Such surplus has been flattened out, packaged and exchanged. This is why the "knowing experience" of the child of which Lacan speaks, free as it is from the enthralled regime of equivalences we adults inhabit, should be recuperated and politicized as the unique experience possessed by the human surplus that defies capital. As Benjamin suggests in passages such as the following, children and slum-dwellers share the same potentiality (surplus-*jouissance*) lost to those immersed in realm of value: 'I never slept on the street in Berlin. Only those for whom poverty and vice turn the city into a landscape in which they stray from dark till sunrise know it in a way denied to me' (Benjamin 1968: 27).

Destroying experience, capitalism turns the "nothing" of truth – the objective entropic waste, indivisible remainder of all signifying operations – into a commodity, an anodyne form of otherness to be profited from. For Lacan, the advent of capitalism coincides with the passage from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the university, whereby the hegemonic place comes to be occupied by knowledge ($S_2$).

Discourse of the Master: $\frac{S_1}{\$} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$

Discourse of the University: $\frac{S_2}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$

As Lacan famously put it:

> Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else, for the important point is that on a certain day surplus pleasure became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called accumulation of capital begins. (Lacan 2007: 177)

At this historical turning point something crucial takes place: the entropy which in the discourse of the master was hidden below knowledge suddenly starts to move, to speak, it becomes visible, turning into the motor of a new discourse where all knowledge passes into value. In Lacan's words, 'it is a matter of the transference, plundering, spoliation of what, at the beginning of knowledge, was inscribed, hidden, in the slave's world' (Lacan 2007: 79). The genie, as it were, escapes from the bottle and enters every little object around us. The formula of fantasy that belonged to the lower level of the master's discourse ($\$ <> a$) is thereby dealt a mortal blow. We go from a social link where the entropic libido-object remained hidden (and yet available to the master thanks to the mediation of the slave who produced it), to another link where this very object acquires centre-stage and full visibility, inasmuch as it occupies the place of the slave, the other qua mediator. By way of this quarter turn, however, the entropic object undergoes a radical transformation: it starts being counted, valorized and invested back into the system, a procedure through which the system aims to reproduce itself in an endless continuum. As Lacan tells us quoting Hegel's "lord and bondsman" dialectics, prior to capitalism knowledge was on the side of the slave, and so was surplus-*jouissance*. With capitalism, and the university discourse, knowledge is formalized and totalized; it is deprived of its original opacity. Firmly in the position of command, this knowledge intervenes directly on the object-libido transforming it into a value. It becomes "dead knowledge", furiously exchanged in a competitive rat race whose real purpose is to make sure that nothing ever changes. Surplus-*jouissance* becomes sheer multiplicity and as such it is counted, whereas earlier it functioned as the hidden truth of the slave's position. Put differently, surplus becomes the desublimated enjoyment that saturates our lives, enticing, disturbing and nauseating at the same time. As such, it thwarts the possibility of experiencing *jouissance* in its traumatic/liberating potential.[5] Thus the element of impossibility (in Žižekian parlance, the "bone in the throat") in the discourse of

the master undergoes a process of radical gentrification which turns it into something *pret-a-jouir*, immediately available for anyone to consume:

> Marx denounces this process [capitalism] as spoliation. It's just that he does it without realizing that its secret lies in knowledge itself, just as the secret of the worker himself is to be reduced to being no longer anything but a value. [. . .] What Marx denounces in surplus value is the spoliation of *jouissance*. And yet, this surplus value is a memorial to surplus *jouissance* [. . .]. "Consumer society" derives its meaning from the fact that what makes it the "element," in inverted commas, described as human is made the homogeneous equivalent of whatever surplus *jouissance* is produced by our industry – an imitation surplus *jouissance*, in a word. Moreover, that can catch on. One can do a semblance of surplus *jouissance* – it draws quite a crowd. (Lacan 2007: 80–1)

As Zupančič points out: 'The revolution related to capitalism is none other than this: it founds the means of making the waste count. Surplus value is nothing else but the waste or loss that counts, and the value of which is constantly being added to or included in the mass of capital' (Zupančič 2006: 170). Capitalism recycles *jouissance* transforming it into enjoyment, an operation that Marcuse captured with the expression "repressive desublimation". It begins when *jouissance* goes from being "lost in production" to being "counted through production", for what is produced is *imitation* surplus-*jouissance*. At the same time, the outcome of this operation is $, the split subject; what the university discourse ultimately produces is therefore alienation, which, however, remains completely out of reach, repressed, excluded.

With the quarter turn effected by the university discourse, then, the slave qua other becomes a worker, i.e. a commodity. Such shift implies not merely the worker's spoliation of money (Marx), but most importantly of knowledge (Lacan). What is at stake in this act of spoliation is the hypostatization of the millenarian intervention through which philosophy extracted knowledge from the slave's working experience, purifying it and turning it into theory, "knowledge that knows itself". What counts supremely for Lacan is that with the elevation of knowledge to the position of authority, the opacity of knowledge, and with it its surplus, is further repressed, rendering the subversion of knowledge more problematic. Knowledge for Lacan cannot be defined through conceptual understanding alone. Pursuing his critique of the university discourse, he shares Hegel's insight into the emergence of knowledge out of the non-transparent conflation of subject and object. In doing so, he places all the stakes on the correlation

between knowledge-at-work and entropy. Given this emphasis, Lacan is here in a sense more Marxist than Marx, since he brings to the surface the Real (hidden) presuppositions of Marx's labour theory, thus coming very close to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique.

## Sohn-Rethel with Lacan

According to Sohn-Rethel, the historical origin of intellectual labour in its separation from man's physical capacities should be linked to the first introduction of coinage, which appears to have taken place in Greece around 680bc (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 67). As we have seen, Sohn-Rethel aims to demonstrate that non-empirical concepts (the "pure intellect" of philosophy) have a materialistic derivation in the private act of commodity exchange:

> The basic categories of intellectual labour [. . .] are replicas of the elements of the real abstraction, and the real abstraction is itself that specific characteristic which endows commodity exchange with its socially synthetic function. [. . .] Throughout the ages of commodity production, from its initial form of ancient slave society to its ultimate capitalist completion, the products of manual labour are private property whereas the products of intellectual labour are social property. (76–7)

Resorting to a line of reasoning which is strikingly similar to Lacan's, Sohn-Rethel laments that through the centuries manual labour has lost its function of social cohesion as a result of its slow but inexorable depletion, culminating in the all-pervasive mode of commodity production characteristic of modern capitalism:[6]

> In a variety of ways – by slave labour, serfdom or wage labour – it [capital] subjects manual labour to exploitation. The manual labour becomes impoverished, not only economically because of its exploitation, but also intellectually. Individual labour is in full control only in the small-scale individual production of peasants and artisans. Only then is production based on the individual unity of head and hand. (78)

Taking as an example the changed practice of measuring from the Bronze (Egyptians) to the Iron Age (Greeks), Sohn-Rethel argues that when the geometry of measurement (an activity of purely intellectual character) was introduced in ancient Greece to replace the art of rope (a manual skill),

this shift was effectively enabled by the advent of the formal mode of abstraction 'intrinsic in the monetary commensuration of commodity values promoted by coinage' (102). Since that moment 'the originally social character of labour with which human history begins' was lost. While it reached 'the point of absolute dissolution in the decline of the Roman Empire when its slave economy changed to feudalism' (110), the socialization of labour saw a brief revival in the 14th century, when artisan production was rife in many parts of Europe. At the end of that century, however, it became clear that the modern form of socialized labour did not depend on man's direct interaction with nature but 'on the subordination of labour to capital' (110). We are already in the epoch of merchant capitalism which prepares the arrival of capitalism proper, when, instead of simply buying commodities from artisans, merchants decide to buy the means of production themselves, employing artisans as wage labourers and extracting their know-how. For Sohn-Rethel, as for Lacan, it is no accident that capitalism emerged during the Renaissance and the concurrent explosion of scientific knowledge. More specifically, he claims that what dramatically increased the cleft between intellectual and manual labour around the end of the 15th century, thus contributing to the birth of capitalism, was mathematics, which began to be utilized consistently especially in calculations concerning the technology of firearms. If technology per se was not the cause of the birth of capitalism, since this cause has to be looked for in the merchant-capitalist purchase of the means of production, it nevertheless contributed to the development of automatism as a key factor in capitalist control over production. As an instance of what Marx calls the 'real subsumption of labour under capital' (see Marx 1990: 1032–35), technological innovation allows the capitalist to deskill workers and increase the reserve army of the unemployed.[7] Logically, then, the automatization of production, fuelled by various advances in modern science, caused labourers to completely forsake their original control over production – in Lacanian terms, they had to forsake their knowledge qua surplus-*jouissance*,[8] knowledge as a "spark" that cannot be taught.

Apropos the unity of head and hand, Sohn-Rethel describes it in a way that again reminds us closely of Lacan's central argument in *Seminar XVII*: 'The artisan or individual manual worker masters his production, not through abstract knowledge, but by practical "know-how" and by the expertise of his hands. In terms of "knowledge", it is the knowledge of what one *does*, not of how one *explains* things' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 112). What is hinted at here is the crucial function of that real and yet ineffable surplus attached to knowledge-at-work that Lacan named surplus-*jouissance*. As Sohn-Rethel

himself puts it, very concisely, 'the fact is that labour, as it occurs in society, is not of itself quantifiable' (168). Although he does not elaborate on this point in the Lacanian direction – that is to say, he does not accomplish the step from knowledge-at-work to the entropic surplus of *jouissance* consubstantial with unconscious knowledge – his thesis that the unity of head and hand is the indispensable condition for the establishment of socialism ('the people as direct producers must be the controlling masters of both the material and intellectual means of production', 184) can be read productively alongside Lacan's own foray into labour theory. In fact, it suggests a practical outcome to Lacan's defence of surplus-*jouissance* against its spoliation within the university discourse.

The Hegelian flavour of Sohn-Rethel's and Lacan's reasoning is unmistakable. As Hegel claimed in his analysis of Lord and Bondsman (Master and Slave) relations in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the origin of the faculty of Understanding, i.e. of using abstract notions, can be found in the forced manual work of the slave. Indeed, Hegel's well-known thesis is that it is precisely by re-appropriating the knowledge implicit in his work that the slave will achieve autonomy (*Selbständigkeit*) from the Master. However, such re-appropriation is no easy feat, for it is validated only by the inscription of negativity – in Lacanian terms, death-drive – in the slave's position. Since the slave became a slave as a consequence of his refusal to risk his life in the fight against the master, reclaiming the knowledge inherent in his work implies confronting the possibility of death and terror in the form of the struggle against the master, for whom the slave has accepted to work. Assuming death and radical finitude as a necessary prerequisite for liberation entails also overcoming the ideological positions historically embraced by the slave, which for Hegel are Stoicism ("I am free because I convince myself that I am free"), Skepticism ("I deny my existence as slave") and finally Christianity ("since the real and only master is God, there is no difference between slavery and mastery on earth").

The key political point here, reiterated by Alexandre Kojève in his lectures on Hegel (from 1933 to 1939, attended by Lacan), is that to become conscious of his knowledge-at-work the slave has to actively assume negativity into his subjective stance. While Kojève interpreted Hegel's negativity as the resolution to act, fight and risk one's life, Lacan linked it specifically to Marx's concept of surplus-value and claimed for it the status of surplus-*jouissance*. In both cases, however, what should be retained is the crucial correlation between the slave's knowledge and its constitutive surplus, which demands to be "disturbed", called into question, ultimately re-signified, if liberation is to be achieved.

Conscious knowledge, Lacan avers, is internally divided between the materiality of know-how and episteme, the latter being constituted by philosophy as a purification of the former (Lacan 2007: 149). However, what supports know-how, especially in the form of the slave's labour, is another knowledge of which we know nothing: 'the foundations of what is known, of what is quietly articulated as the little master, as the ego, as he who knows a bit about it, resides in such a relation as this and, precisely, insofar as it is not known' (30). It is worth repeating that we are dealing with the slave's know-how inasmuch as it 'constitutes a non-revealed unconscious', 'unconscious knowledge' (30), 'headless knowledge [. . .] this knowledge insofar as it is split off, *urverdrängt*, insofar as it is split off and nobody understands a thing about it' (90). In this respect, knowledge and discourse are homologous inasmuch as they are, strictly speaking, impossible, i.e. coincidental with their own unconscious substance: 'Knowledge [. . .] is something spoken, something that is said. Well then, knowledge that speaks all by itself – that's the unconscious' (70). It is vital to notice here how the binary logic of the semantic opposition episteme vs. unconscious (or known knowledge vs. unknown knowledge) actually conceals the fact that the two terms at some point must overlap. Ultimately, episteme itself *is* its own unconscious impasse, and the question that Lacan invites us to ponder with regard to this impasse concerns its *materiality*. A politically productive way of reading Lacan's critique of the university discourse, or scientific epistemology, is to realize how it invites us to grasp that the foundations of knowledge are *both unconscious and material*. Unconscious knowledge itself can only be located via knowledge-at-work, or in Sohn-Rethel's terms, by calling into question the unity of head and hand.

## A new master

As we have seen, with the epistemological break determined by the passage to the university discourse of modernity we witness an attempt to totalize the field of knowledge, depriving it of its unconscious, entropic and material foundations. In the new discourse dominated by the objective neutrality of scientific knowledge, however, the master does not disappear, but simply reconfigures its role. Objectivity is therefore merely presumed. As Žižek writes, 'the constitutive lie of the university discourse is that it disavows its performative dimension, presenting what effectively amounts to a political decision based on power as a simple insight into the factual state of things' (Žižek 2004a: 394). We should not forget that while in the university discourse all-knowing $S_2$ is at the helm, $S_1$, the master-signifier, occupies the

position of truth. What happens in the shift between 'the classical master's discourse and the modern master, whom we call capitalist', is therefore a 'modification in the place of knowledge' (Lacan 2007: 31). Via Kojève, Lacan refers again to Hegel's *Phenomenology*:

> Hegel finds a way to show that [. . .] in the end it is the slave who, through his work, produces the master's truth, by pushing him down underneath. By virtue of this forced labor, as you can see from the outset, the slave ends up, at the end of history, at this point called absolute knowledge. [. . .] I call this slave $S_2$, but you can also identify him here by way of the term *jouissance*, which, first, he did not want to renounce and which, secondly, he did indeed want to, since he substitutes work for it, which is not at all its equivalent. (170)

The anti-clockwise quarter turn that installs 'the new tyranny of knowledge' as the new master, then, also means that the link between the slave (other) and the production of *a* (the hidden object of desire) is replaced by the short-circuit between knowledge and the new others/commodities (workers, students). The main consequence of this new state of affairs is that the place of production is now occupied by $, the subject of the unconscious. This new subject, produced by and foreclosed to universal knowledge, is effectively the excluded subject of our geopolitical constellation. It is what Agamben has called *homo sacer*, an individual reduced to bare life.

So how do we detect the master in all this? When knowledge ($S_2$) comes to occupy the hegemonic place of the agent, it changes its constitution, it becomes autonomous, objective, *pretending* to abandon its foundation in *jouissance*. Its new categorical imperative is the "keep on knowing" of the scientific discourse (Lacan 2007: 105), as well as the "keep on buying" of capitalism. However, this knowledge is far from neutral:

> superego is not directly $S_2$; it is rather the $S_1$ of the $S_2$ itself, the dimension of an unconditional injunction that is inherent to knowledge itself. Recall the health information we are bombarded with all the time: "Smoking is dangerous! Too much fat may cause a heart attack! Regular exercise leads to a longer life!" etc. – it is impossible not to hear beneath it the unconditional injunction "You should enjoy a long and healthy life!" (Žižek 2004a: 402)

The upshot is obvious: 'the discourse of the University is thoroughly mystifying, concealing its true foundation, obfuscating the unfreedom on which it relies' (Žižek 2003a).

The historical novelty of capitalism qua new master consists in the fact that knowledge-at-work for the first time appears on the market as a commodity: 'Capital emerges only when the possessor of the means of production finds, on the market, a *free* worker selling his labor power as object' (Zupančič 2006: 169). More precisely, what capitalists buy from the workers (which, let us not forget, have been stripped of their capacity to provide for themselves),[9] is knowledge, which, as Lacan intimates, they do not pay for. Lacan is very clear on this point: what is at stake in this "theft of knowledge" is both the fact that workers lose the entropy/surplus that gave them their status, and the fact the new knowledge establishes 'an equivalence between this entropy and information' (Lacan 2007: 82). When all one can do is buy, one has nothing to do with *jouissance* anymore. This is indeed, according to Lacan, the reason why workers have lost their potential to act as subversive subjects. They buy from the wealthy, because they believe that they are going to share in their wealth; '[h]owever, in the process, what you lose is your knowledge, which gave you your status. The wealthy acquire this knowledge on top of everything else. It's simply that, precisely, they don't pay for it'. From being an inherently subversive weapon, knowledge becomes a means to wealth, and thus 'only a tool of exploitation' (83).

If the workers' position within the capitalist process can be regarded as a case of "prostitution", then what is prostituted above all is the surplus inherent to knowledge in its Lacanian signification. It is important to reiterate that the workers lose the only thing that could make their position subversive. The paradox is that what they are robbed of is not formally describable and quantifiable knowledge, but the radical imbalance that was once brought into their status as producers (i.e. through the production of *objet a*). After losing this knowledge, they acquire it back only after it has been sterilized and gentrified by the new scientific discourse. The acquisition of this knowledge gives them the right to enter the discourse of the wealthy, thus prompting the definitive closure of their subjectivity. This means that they move away from the possibility of, as it were, getting in touch with the unconscious, which amounts to the possibility of experiencing that collapse of "known knowledge" necessary to determine change. Truth as "half-saying" is further removed from their radar. Similarly, students can only "sneak around", and not transgress; they see a door half-open, but are unable to go through it – as Lacan puts it in a passage reminiscent of Kafka's parable of the man of country in front of the law (see Lacan 2007: 19). The psychoanalytic contribution to revolutionary politics can be gauged in the claim that radical change becomes possible only at that epistemological conjuncture where the symbolic knowledge supporting

the subject *fails*. And, as Lacan reminds his audience at the end of the lesson of 11 February 1970, the function of the analyst is to make us aware that 'everything hinges on failure' (83). Through this claim, he hints at the key equivalence between surplus and loss, incarnated in the figure of the analyst. What workers have lost control over is the *a* which, precisely as loss, occupies the function of agent in the discourse of the analyst:

> What object is it that results from this effect of a certain discourse? We know nothing about this object, except that it is the cause of desire, that is to say that strictly speaking it manifests itself as want-to-be. There is therefore no being that is thereby determined. (Lacan 2007: 151)

Lacan suggests that, insofar as the analyst embodies a surplus of knowledge which draws its status from the fact that at some point it reveals itself as lack, it is only from this surplus qua lack that a *new* master-signifier can emerge: 'what he [the analyst] produces is nothing other than the master's discourse, since it's $S_1$ which comes to occupy the place of production. And [. . .] perhaps it's from the analyst's discourse that there can emerge another style of master signifier' (Lacan 2007: 176).

Discourse of the Analyst: $\frac{a}{S_2} \longrightarrow \frac{S}{S_1}$

## *Objet a* between Marx and Hitchcock

Let us now return one final time to the initial homology. As surplus-*jouissance* is converted into surplus-value, the object-cause of desire (*objet a*), by definition unnameable, sheds its disturbing weight and is demoted to the level of commodity. Paradoxically, then, what was hidden in the master's discourse is now further repressed as it undergoes a radical transformation affecting its substance. The constant reintegration and valorization of excess (knowledge) produces more valorized excess (knowledge), in a seemingly endless spiral. From this we infer that the libidinal aim of consumer society is to prevent anxiety by, as it were, dressing up *jouissance* in sexy garments and making it available everywhere, *to the extent, however, that its endogenous reproduction generates nothing but more anxiety*. In today's consumer society, enjoyment and anxiety coincide. Although we know full well that commodities only bring ephemeral and angst-ridden pleasures, our answer to this predicament is to consume more, if only to avoid falling behind in the treadmill contest with our fellow consumers. Today we

appraise each other according to what we consume, regardless of the real benefits of consumption. Within this depressing framework, we should not lose sight of the key factor, namely that what is turned into a commodity is surplus – the original one being, of course, work. No wonder, then, that today 'work itself (manual labour as opposed to the "symbolic" activity of cultural production), not sex, appears as the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye' (Žižek 2002a: 289). This point confirms Lacan's thesis that *work is the original site of jouissance*: it not only produces things, but also a quantum of entropy that threatens the capitalist network at its foundations, and for that reason needs to be constantly gentrified.[10]

In its dialogue with Marx's theory of value, Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that unless we come to terms with the fact that *jouissance*, the object-libido, constitutes the basis for the articulation of any social link insofar as it emanates from knowledge-at-work, we shall never truly comprehend the inner logic of capitalism, nor the dynamics of its potential overcoming:

> The intrusion into the political can only be made by recognizing that the only discourse there is, and not just analytic discourse, is the discourse of *jouissance*, at least when one is hoping for the work of truth from it. (Lacan 2007: 78)

After all, Lacan's return to Freud is based on the evidence that Freud 'is worthy of a discourse that maintains itself as close as possible to what refers to *jouissance*' – although sometimes 'Freud shies away, abandons us', as when he 'abandons the question of feminine *jouissance*' (Lacan 2007: 71). But this is already another story.

Given the context hereby investigated, Žižek argues that Marx's error lies in hypothesizing that, with the elimination of surplus-value (the inherent obstacle/contradiction *and* productive engine of capitalism), we would get unrestrained production, abundance for everyone. While this utopian scenario is actually a capitalist fantasy, the problem with Marx's diagnosis can be understood via Lacan as the failure to posit the 'ambiguous overlapping' (Žižek 2006a: 126) of surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance*. To put it concisely: inasmuch as we accept the Lacanian thesis that surplus-value is grounded in surplus-*jouissance*, the elimination of surplus-value effectively determines the disappearance of the productive drive itself. Resorting to an example from Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1959), Žižek mentions the gap between Madeleine (object of desire) and her curl of blonde hair (*objet a*, the *cause* of desire) to argue that Marx's object of desire (unconstrained productivity) also depends on the presence of surplus-value. Just as, for Scottie, Judy would

not "become" Madeleine without her blond curl, so there is no production without the "inherent obstacle" named surplus-value. Why? Because – and this is the key point – surplus-value, like the blond curl, stands for, or overlaps with, the foundational surplus (qua lack) that qualifies *jouissance*. The problem with Marx's hypothesis of the elimination of surplus-value, therefore, is that it obfuscates the ontological presupposition of surplus-value itself, namely surplus-*jouissance*, upon which everything (the construction of any social order) hinges. The same problem can be detected in Deleuze as an anti-Lacanian figure:

> Deleuze asserts the priority of desire over its objects: desire in Deleuze is a positive productive force that exceeds its objects, a living flow proliferating through the multitude of objects, penetrating them and passing through them, with no need for any fundamental lack or "castration" that would serve as its foundation. For Lacan, however, desire has to be sustained by an object cause: not some primordial incestuous lost object on which desire remains forever transfixed and whose unsatisfying substitutes all other objects are, but a purely formal object which causes us to desire objects that we encounter in reality. This object cause of desire is thus not transcendent, an inaccessible excess forever eluding our grasp, but behind the subject's back, something that directs desire from within. As is the case with Marx, Deleuze's failure to take into account this object-cause sustains the illusory vision of unconstrained productivity of desire – or, in the case of Hardt and Negri, the illusory vision of multitude ruling itself, no longer constrained by any totalizing One. We can observe here the catastrophic political consequences of the failure to develop what may appear a purely "academic", philosophical, notional distinction. (Žižek 2006a: 127)

This analysis confirms that any viable *materialist* critique of capitalism needs to take into account the *formal* deadlock of desire. Although surplus-value must be exposed as the historically specific cause of capitalist production, *in its deepest configuration* it is not dispensable, for it relates to an elusive object-cause whose status is foundational, and as such inerasable. Marx's surplus labour-power is therefore *not* a use-value, i.e. it cannot be conceived as a *positively given* terrain on which to theorize an alternative economy.[11] Marx, Žižek argues, first recognized the problem of the ontological dimension of surplus, but then "pretended" he did not know it when he described the passage from capitalism to socialism using the "vulgar" evolutionist dialectics between forces and relations of production:

> when the forces surpass a certain degree, capitalist relation become an obstacle to their further development: this discord brings about the need for socialist revolution, the function of which is to co-ordinate again forces and relation; that is, to establish relations of production rendering possible the intensified development of the productive forces as the end-in-itself of the historical process. How can we not detect in this formulation the fact that Marx failed to cope with the paradoxes of surplus-enjoyment? (Žižek 1989: 53)

The logical outcome of this critique is that any alternative social system which does not contemplate the dialectics of desire and *objet a* – the structuring of desire into a socially viable whole through its link to an excessive/elusive element embodying the surplus of *jouissance* – is also doomed. As history has indeed shown us, the elimination of surplus-value, and consequently profit, does not automatically usher in the elimination of misery, since it fails to consider how surplus-value has its roots in surplus-*jouissance*. A combined reading of Lacan's critique of surplus-value and Sohn-Rethel's analysis of intellectual and manual labour suggests that unless we find a way to re-politicize both the sphere of material production and its foundation in entropic *jouissance*, it is unlikely that we shall succeed in promoting a sustainable alternative to capitalism. Today, politicizing the Real coterminous with any knowledge-at-work amounts to politicizing the key symptom of our immersion in the symbolic order.

Chapter 4

# The unbearable lightness of being the proletariat

As emphasized, what we find at the heart of Lacan's analysis of the four discourses is the politically pregnant claim that the working classes have been expropriated of what was unique to their condition, i.e. the "weight of knowledge". Questioned on the position of the proletarian, Lacan replies that it is there where

> knowledge no longer has any weight. The proletarian is not simply exploited, he has been stripped of his function of knowledge. The so-called liberation of the slave has had, as always, other corollaries. It's not merely progressive. It's progressive only at the price of a deprivation. (Lacan 2007: 149)

This notion of "weightless knowledge" attached to the signifier "proletariat" is indeed crucial to grasp the potential of an anti-capitalist politics. Why weightless? Because since the dawn of capitalism the worker's knowledge has been progressively deprived of the surplus that originally qualified it. In the process it has become structurally identical to the knowledge of the master-capitalist inasmuch as it now perceives *jouissance* as incarnated in the enjoyment of the commodity.

## Kojève with Lacan

Alexandre Kojève, who introduced Lacan to Hegel's dialectics of master and slave, focuses precisely on the disappearance of such dialectics caused by the concomitant intervention of Christian ideology and bourgeois subjectivity. Masters, he claims, have become pseudo-masters as they no longer take real risks to achieve their position of command; at the same time, slaves

have turned into pseudo-slaves for, in their mind, they have ceased to work for another. Perceiving themselves as free individuals,

> the Slaves themselves become Slaves without Masters, pseudo-Masters. Therefore, the opposition of Mastery and Slavery is "overcome". Not, however, because the Slaves have become true Masters. The unification is effected in *pseudo*-Mastery, which is – in fact – a pseudo-*Slavery*, a Slavery without Masters. This Slave without a Master, this Master without a Slave, is what Hegel calls the *Bourgeois*, the private property-owner. (Kojève 1980: 63)

In the bourgeois universe the desire for private property is so overwhelming that it dominates all other human motivations, thereby fully unleashing the Stoic, Skeptic and Christian individualistic ideologies as social forces. Kojève's position on the Hegelian (and consequently Marxian and Lacanian) question of the status of work within capitalist dynamics is extremely clear, pointing significantly to the link between work and theory:

> To be a truly human being, the Bourgeois (who, in principle, does not fight, does not risk his life) must *work*, just like the Slave. But in contrast to the Slave, since the Bourgeois has no Master, he does not have to work in *another's* service. Therefore, he believes that he works for himself. Now in the Hegelian conception, work can truly be Work, a specifically *human* Action, only on the condition that it be carried out in relation to an *idea* (a "project") – that is, in relation to something other than the *given*, and, in particular, other than the given that the worker himself is. (Kojève 1980: 64)

How does Hegel conceptualize this otherness to which work should be dedicated? In Kojève's reading:

> A man can also work (and this is the *Hegelian*, definitive solution of the problem) by being supported by the idea of the Community, of the State: one can – and one must – work for the State. But the Bourgeois can do neither the one nor the other. He no longer has a Master whom he could have served by working. And he does not yet have a State, for the bourgeois World is but an agglomeration of *private* Property-owners, isolated from each other, without true community. (64–5)

Without delving into the Hegelian question of the community, let us consider how Kojève understands the seemingly insoluble problem of the bourgeois approach to work. The contradiction at the core of this predicament is actually simple to grasp: if work is by definition *for another* (person,

project, etc.), how can one work *for oneself*? The answer lies of course in the very "dislocated" form of bourgeois subjectivity:

> The Bourgeois does not work for another. But he does not work for himself, taken as a biological entity, either. He works for himself taken as a "legal *person*", as a private *Property-owner*: he works for Property taken as such – i.e., Property that has now become *money*; he works for Capital. (65)

Here we encounter the central feature sustaining the bourgeois-capitalist universe. Insofar as it is founded in what Žižek would call a case of "fetishistic disavowal" (I pretend to work for myself when I know full well that I actually work for capital), bourgeois subjectivity presupposes what Kojève, via Hegel, calls 'an *Entsagung*, an *Abnegation* of human existence', which translates very precisely as a denial or transcendence of one's own excess qua force of the negative:

> Man transcends himself, surpasses himself, projects himself far away from himself by projecting himself onto the idea of private Property, of Capital, which – while being the Property-owner's own product – becomes independent of him and enslaves him just as the Master enslaved the Slave; with this difference, however, that the enslavement is now conscious and freely accepted by the Worker. (We see, by the way, that for Hegel, as for Marx, the central phenomenon of the bourgeois World is not the enslavement of the working man, of the *poor* bourgeois, by the rich bourgeois, but the enslavement of *both* by Capital). However that may be, bourgeois existence presupposes, engenders, and nourishes Abnegation. (65)

In Lacanian terms, bourgeois existence presupposes the triumph of enjoyment over *jouissance*; or, from the viewpoint of Christian ideology, 'the refusal of death, the desire for animal life, for *Sein*, which in Christianity is sublimated in a desire for immortality, for "eternal life"' (Kojève 1980: 65–6). Ultimately, bourgeois work contains *the abnegation of work as such*, the denial of the active force of the negative which is operative within every authentic knowledge-at-work, and fulfils itself in the creation and realization of a project.

Precisely because the notion of work has lost its original centrifugal purpose (for *another*), Lacan claims that we should refrain from hypostatizing work under the capitalist (pseudo-)master:

> Work has never been given such credit ever since humanity has existed. It is even out of the question that one not work. This is surely an

> accomplishment of what I am calling the master's discourse. [. . .] I am speaking of this capital mutation, also, which gives the master's discourse its capitalist style. (Lacan 2007: 168)

Under what Bataille termed the 'universal meanness' of capitalism (Bataille 1980: 125), the worker has lost its roots in surplus and yet he is told that only through his assiduous labour can social progress be achieved. Lacan is quick to notice this basic ruse of the capitalist discourse:

> It is in effect quite evident that not for a single instant can one hold that we are in any way approaching the ascendancy of the slave. This unbelievable way of giving him the credit – giving his work the credit – for any kind of progress, as we say, of knowledge is, truly, extraordinarily futile. (Lacan 2007: 171)

The outcome of all this is that with the triumph of the university discourse 'the clouds of impotence have been aired' from the place of the master. Therefore, 'the master signifier only appears even more unassailable, precisely in its impossibility. Where is it? How can it be named? How can it be located? – other than through its murderous effects, of course. Denounce imperialism? But how can this little mechanism be stopped?' (Lacan 2007: 178).

## Žižek against Negri

In light of the historical developments of contemporary capitalism, Antonio Negri (together with other Marxist theorists close to his positions) proposes that intellectual labour-power be thought of as free from capitalist relations of production. Negri's starting point is that the post-Fordist shift towards cognitive labour confirms Marx's stance on the self-overcoming of capitalism. More precisely, he argues that technological progress today reduces the necessity of material labour to the point that labour-time is released from its vital link with the production of surplus-value. Since labour-time is becoming progressively irrelevant as capitalism tends to appropriate intellectual labour-power or social knowledge, and since, as Marx described, surplus-value originates in the extraction of surplus labour-time, the exploitative foundations of capitalism are already undermined. Here, however, two questions immediately arise: (1) To what extent can we legitimately claim that direct labour-power is less and less relevant for capitalist production, if, as already stressed, traditional material labour is simply being outsourced and performed away

from our impressionable sight? The problem of direct exploitation, also in terms of appropriation of surplus labour-time, is far from irrelevant or secondary. (2) To what extent is Negri right in his prediction that the "general intellect" is free from capitalist relations, and thus capitalist ideology – to the point that, according to him, it is ready to embrace the political form of absolute democracy? Furthermore, what does absolute democracy mean concretely? Negri suggests that since capitalism no longer directly organizes labour, collective labour is ready to directly organize human life. Žižek sums up the inconsistencies of this position with a series of questions:

> Surely, the first task of the Marxist approach here should be to redefine in more stringent terms the notion of the exploitation of "intellectual labor"? In what precise theoretical sense is, say, Bill Gates "exploiting" thousands of programmers who work for him, if his exploitation is no longer the "theft of alien labor time"? Is his role really purely "parasitical" upon the self-organization of the programmers? Does his capital not, in a more substantial way, provide the very social space for their cooperation? And in what precise sense is the intellectual labor the "source of value", if the ultimate measure of value is no longer time? Is the category of value still applicable here? (Žižek 2008a: 357)

As Žižek further notes, by claiming that the epoch of wage labour is drawing to a close and that the struggle is now between multitude and the state, Negri does not actually reject capitalism. The point is rather that the duality of the production process has achieved, today, a dimension that *Marx himself did not foresee*, with the radical separation of the domain of immaterial labour (the cognitive work described by Negri) and the domain of material production. We have on one side "postmodern" companies where the intellect is *creatively* set free; and on the other 'the material production process where full automatization is far from achieved, so that we have – often literally on the other side of the world – sweatshops with a strict "Fordist" organization of labor, where thousands assemble computers and toys, pick bananas and coffee beans, mine for coal or diamonds, and so forth' (Žižek 2008a: 359). It is interesting to note how in maintaining that the *material component of production* is ingrained in capitalism, regardless of the latter's technological advances, Žižek argues a key point made by Marx: surplus-value can only be extracted if, no matter how dominant the role played by machines, there are workers operating them.[1] Rather than having a "parasite role", today's capital is the agency that increasingly *mediates* between material and immaterial/intellectual labour, the implication being that it

cuts across both fields. To downplay or conceal the co-dependence of these two fields insofar as they are mediated and subsumed by capital results in obliterating the "weight of work", not only with reference to material production per se, but most crucially in connection with the key problem of the unity of head and hand in its Lacanian framework. If the crucial ground for any anti/post-capitalist model of society is to create a space of autonomy from capitalist dynamics, embracing immaterial labour per se as the basis for this autonomy is at best naive, for it does not take into account the tremendous power of capitalist ideology – which, we need to add, fully realizes itself at the level of circulation and consumption.

Negri's solution should thus be reversed: autonomy from capitalist dynamics can only be conceived within a project that re-politicizes the all-too-often forgotten sphere of production starting from the central issue of the separation of intellectual and manual labour. Within such a context, the role of leftist politics, no matter how radical, needs to be thoroughly reconfigured. What is necessary at this level is a move from political platforms where the key goal is either to defend and improve the workers' salaries, or to engage the multitude of immaterial workers, to a platform where we redefine the very meaning and purpose of knowledge-at-work. More specifically, the unique chance for today's left entails the political mediation between exclusion and the redefinition of work in its inherently excessive/creative dimension. It is within this context that we should read Žižek's suggestion that

> [p]erhaps it is the figure of the unemployed (jobless) person who stands for the pure proletarian today: the substantial determination of an unemployed person remains that of a worker, but he or she is prevented from either actualizing or renouncing it, so that he or she remains suspended in the potentiality of a worker who cannot work. (Žižek 2002a: 290–91)

It is this potentiality situated between the two determinations of capitalist production (employed and unemployed) that needs to be actualized today, i.e. politicized – especially, as Žižek adds, in view of the fact that in today's "risk society" we are all potentially jobless. This means not that the post-industrial capitalist scenarios we are confronted with make the existence of workers obsolete. Instead, if our society 'needs fewer and fewer workers to reproduce itself (20 percent of the workforce, on some accounts), then *it is not workers who are in excess, but Capital itself* (Žižek 2002a: 291). What this implies is the complex problem of a thorough redefinition of the function of work.

In light of these considerations, there is another question that should be raised apropos Negri's stance: is it correct to think of cognitive labour-power

in terms of labour-time alone? Does Negri not repeat Marx's mistake when he takes labour-time as his ultimate point of reference? If we follow Lacan's argument, the time we spend at work (including the surplus time testifying to our being exploited) is strictly speaking a secondary aspect when compared to the surplus which pertains to our knowledge-at-work. And Lacan's fundamental thesis is that this libidinal surplus to which we are condemned as speaking beings in general, and specifically as possessors of labour-power, is unconscious – which incidentally also means that it cannot be unproblematically conceived as the terrain for absolute democracy. With Lacan, then, we would insist that the act of subtraction, of reaching an autonomous distance from capitalist dynamics, must at a certain level be experienced as traumatic, for it necessarily involves our effort to detach from what has colonized our unconscious. It follows that we experience the same difficulty apropos the next dialectical step concerning the actual organization of our autonomous space, for we would have to discern a new "anchoring point" for the surplus that (su)stains our existence.

## The bearable lightness of immaterial labour

Furthermore, although the shift towards immaterial labour is a fact, it applies mainly to the technologically developed countries, while globally speaking the old separation between intellectual and manual labour remains a dominant factor. However, even considering the developed countries alone, what are the implications of this shift for the worker? Manual labour increasingly becomes intellectual labour, requiring different communicative and technical skills, from decision-making to control and handling of information. This speaks for a significant change in the worker's subjectivity, which, however, does not seamlessly lead to a significant shift in power relations. Maurizio Lazzarato puts this in familiar Foucauldian terms:

> The new slogan of Western societies is that we should all 'become subjects'. Participative management is a technology of power, a technology for creating and controlling the 'subjective processes'. As it is no longer possible to confine subjectivity merely to tasks of execution, it becomes necessary for the subject's competence in the areas of management, communication and creativity to be made compatible with the conditions of 'production for production's sake'. Thus the slogan 'become subjects', far from eliminating the antagonism between hierarchy and cooperation, between autonomy and command, actually re-poses the antagonism at a

> higher level, because it both mobilizes and clashes with the very personality of the individual worker. First and foremost, we have a discourse that is authoritarian: one *has to* express oneself, one *has to* speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth. [. . .] The management mandate to 'become subjects of communication' threatens to be even more totalitarian than the earlier rigid division between mental and manual labor (ideas and execution), because capitalism seeks to involve even the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value. (Lazzarato 1996: 135–36)

Everything should be endorsed here, down to the totalitarian dimension of the injunction to enjoy one's free and creative subjectivity, which falsely projects the worker into management while keeping him in the old productive position. To what extent, then, can we detect signs of potential emancipation in a situation that erodes working-class identity by creating malleable, "light" productive subjectivities? Lazzarato, similarly to Hardt, Negri and others, believes that post-industrial productive subjects are capable of self-valorization, precisely because capital has forced them out of the outdated working-class identity and emptied them of the "old ideological baggage". What he detects is a condition of 'pure virtuality, a capacity that is as yet undetermined' (136) that, inasmuch as it 'exists only in the form of networks and flows' (137) and gives body to autonomous productive synergies, is capable of corroding the macro-economy and creating a new anthropological force. This 'new phenomenology of labor' based on 'collective cognitive mechanisms' (139) is seen as *not* merely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism, but as a move representing 'a "silent revolution" taking place within the anthropological realities of work and within the reconfigurations of its meanings':

> A polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of "intellectual worker" who is him- or herself an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space. (140)

What is delineated here is a typically Deleuzian-Guattarian appraisal of rhizomatic subjectivity, whose strength lies in refusing fixed positions, thus evading structural totalization. Lazzarato sees the new post-industrial productive subject as, essentially, a rhizome. Moreover, he places this rhizomatic subject within a productive context where the classic production-consumption cycle has morphed into a cycle of production-communication, since today we

predominantly consume information. Both in large-scale industry and especially in the tertiary sector, he claims, immaterial labour tends to produce immaterial (cultural, cognitive, ideological, etc.) forms of consumption which are disjointed from the old (Taylorist and Fordist) production-consumption dynamics. In short, immaterial labour produces social relations (communication), which 'poses a problem of legitimacy for the capitalist appropriation of this process. This cooperation can in no case be predetermined by economics, because it deals with the very life of society' (146). Capitalism is therefore forced into a parasitic position that weakens it:

> For economics there remains only the possibility of managing and regulating the activity of immaterial labor and creating some devices for the control and creation of the public/consumer by means of control of communication and information technology and their organizational processes. (146)

The illusory dimension inscribed in this vision should be firmly opposed through the simple observation that the very notion of immaterial labour is integral to capital's ability to revolutionize itself, while the basic mechanism that regulates both production and consumption remains the same, insofar as it continues being centred on the appropriation of surplus-value. Do we really believe that immaterial or cognitive labour is already potentially delivered from the capitalist production process and, likewise, that it is already producing its own autonomous forms of communicative consumption?[2] The category that is emphatically missing from this type of analysis is that of enjoyment in its specific psychoanalytic meaning. If capitalism is parasitic, its object is less the creation of immaterial labour than the unconscious enjoyment of producers and consumers alike, who – this is undoubtedly true – are increasingly merging into a single figure. The reason why immaterial labour, despite the optimistic premises of theorists like Lazzarato, is tragically unable to "spread its wings" and create authentically autonomous spaces outside capital, is that "it enjoys too much". It remains viscerally attached to the (cultural, ideological, social, political, etc.) regimes of enjoyment dictated by capital and, more generally, by what Lacan had baptized the university discourse.

With the concept of immaterial labour elaborated by Negri, Hardt, Lazzarato, Virno and others, we find ourselves at the opposite end of Lacan's position, which decries the intervention of the university discourse inasmuch as it determines the closing up of the social. For Hardt and Negri, the key cipher of postmodernity (as well as post-Fordism) is that *causes* are not

followed by more or less predictable *effects* as in previous historical epochs, but by 'repercussions' and 'unexpected emergencies' which testify to the fragmentation and *openness* of the postmodern condition (in Negri 2008: 175). Far from witnessing the end of history, or simply the victory of capitalism over ideological struggles, we are told that we inhabit a time potentially pregnant with new subjectivities. Immaterial labour is seen as the crucial Marxian symptom of the untimeliness of causal relations and therefore of the openness of the situation:

> Inasmuch as immaterial labour (intellectual, affective, relational and so on) becomes hegemonic over material labour, social ontology itself presents itself under a different form, since the product of intellect is always excedent; and, to this *excedence* of immateriality (what we refer to as invention-power) is added an excedence of *cooperation*, in which the common of the multitude is deployed among singularities. In this way *social ontology becomes biopolitical*. This means that the production process invests life itself, where by production process we mean the complex of knowledge and passions, of languages and emotions, that make up subjectivity. (in Negri 2008: 175)

In our postmodern universe, then, it would seem that value is created by immaterial labour according to a new temporality that is co-extensive with biopolitics itself, with the production of life. Insisting on the necessity of deconstructing and rewriting Marx's theory of value, Hardt and Negri remind us that too many things have changed since Marx spoke of exploitation – most importantly, hard labour has turned into labour as creative activity, de-materialized labour. Moreover, collective capital no longer imposes the cooperation of the workforce from outside, but rather tries to bring it under its own control through a new division of labour. However, the key question is: did these epochal changes or paradigm shifts take place *as a result of capitalism losing its grip on production*, or *as a result of dynamics internal to capitalism*, i.e. its inveterate ability to adapt to new realities? Lacan sees the triumph of the university discourse as the fertile ground on which capitalism forges a new method of extracting surplus-value: workers are not only expropriated of their labour time but more importantly of their knowledge qua *jouissance*, which signals their full cooptation into capitalist ideology. Hardt and Negri understand this process in opposite terms:

> And we should also stress that the cooperation of living labour is, so to speak, produced and nourished by the excedence of labour as activity

> and expression: that is, by the excess which activity (particularly immaterial activity, the expression of the brain) always produces and which, removing itself by definition from routine and repetition, invents new forms of living and new products of life. If this is the postmodern nature of living labour and if these are the conditions of the valorization of the activity of the worker, how are we then to define *exploitation*? It absolutely has to consist in *the expropriation by capital of the expressive and of the cooperation of living labour.* (in Negri 2008: 184)

It is significant to note that, at a certain level, Hardt and Negri's diagnosis overlaps with Lacan's, in that immaterial activity for them is defined as something inherently uncountable and excessive. The focus is precisely on the excess produced by work as the 'expression of the brain', i.e. by knowledge-at-work. The crucial difference, however, is that while Lacan conceives of this excess/surplus as the substance which, in the quarter turn towards the university discourse, is stealthily expropriated from the workforce and transformed into surplus-value, Hardt and Negri as well as other Italian Marxists such as Paolo Virno (2007) and Carlo Vercellone (2007), take it to designate a new biopolitical common which is (potentially) free from value. Drawing on Marx's notion of the "general intellect",[3] they maintain that, since labour is measurable in units of time, scientific progress has determined both an increase in productivity *and* the conditions for the autonomy of the workforce insofar as its creative function, no longer measurable in linear time, has become progressively in excess of the determination of value. The hybridization of life and labour, well beyond traditional determinations of labour time, suggests that the theory of value should be redefined as a theory of value *produced by the common*, which, while still appropriated by capital, is in a much stronger position to determine its condition of autonomy from it.

Put differently, Hardt and Negri interpret Foucault's "society of control", where power becomes thoroughly biopolitical and therefore all-pervasive, as an open field. When the interiorization of power dynamics and mechanisms of command supplant explicit disciplinary power – in other words, when the disciplinarity of power becomes increasingly invisible because distributed through democratic channels – paradoxically, they argue, a multitude of resistances are more likely to emerge. Drawing here on Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Foucault's theory of the society of control, Hardt and Negri insist on

> the paradox of a power that, while it unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life (thus losing its capacity effectively to mediate

> different social forces), at that very moment reveals a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization – a milieu of the event. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 25)

From this angle, the problem with Hardt and Negri's theory of emancipation is particularly evident. While they acknowledge that the postmodern and biopolitical society of control 'permeates entirely the consciousness and bodies of individuals' (24), they do not consider how the key factor in this new biopolitical extension of power resides in power's talent in subsuming and domesticating unconscious enjoyment insofar as it is *inherent to intellectual as well as material labour*, and it is spuriously embodied in the act of consumption. A worker is not suddenly any freer (even potentially) from capitalist ideology, and therefore from the mire of value, simply because his contribution to capitalist production has become either immaterial or affective. Rather, his immersion in capitalism is aggravated by the fact that capital has managed to appropriate and commodify his surplus-*jouissance*, the excess consubstantial with labour itself. This prompts me to reassert that the intrinsic limit of all the theories on the revolutionary/subversive role of the working-class, whether of the Fordist or post-Fordist period, has been their short-sightedness with regard to the psychoanalytic conception of surplus.

It could be said that Lacan shifts the focus from the factory to the university, where, as Žižek reminds us, what is at stake is much more than just the university as a social institution:

> The University discourse as the hegemonic discourse of modernity has two forms of existence in which its inner tension ("contradiction") is externalized: capitalism, its logic of the integrated excess, of the system reproducing itself through constant self-revolutionizing, and bureaucratic "totalitarianism" which is conceptualized in different guises as the rule of technology, instrumental reason, biopolitics, as the "administered world" – how, precisely, do these two aspects relate to each other? That is to say, one should not succumb to the temptation of reducing capitalism to a mere form of appearance of the more fundamental ontological attitude of technological domination; one should rather insist, in the Marxian mode, that the capitalist logic of integrating the surplus into the functioning of the system is the fundamental fact. Stalinist "totalitarianism" was the capitalist logic of self-propelling productivity liberated from its capitalist form, which is why it failed: Stalinism was the symptom of capitalism. Stalinism involved the matrix of general intellect, of the

> planned transparency of social life, of total productive mobilization – and its violent purges and paranoia were a kind of a "return of the repressed", the "irrationality" inherent to the project of a totally organized "administered society". (Žižek 2004a: 402–03)

This critical understanding of the university discourse inevitably casts a long shadow over the concept of a positive biopolitics which does not take into consideration the surplus-*jouissance* that in modernity has lost its place and autonomy. In a society dominated by the university discourse, i.e. by the capitalist integration of excess and its subsequent regurgitation as imitation-enjoyment, we not only get, as an inevitable effect, the "totalitarian" rule of instrumental reason, or the global reflexivization of everyday life; we are also confronted with the return of the repressed in the form of what Žižek, drawing on Etienne Balibar (see Balibar 1996), calls Id-Evil, that is to say 'a violence grounded in no utilitarian or ideological reason', which is 'structured and motivated by the most elementary imbalance in the relationship between the ego and *jouissance*, by the tension between pleasure and the foreign body of *jouissance* in the very heart of it' (Žižek 2000a: 201).

Žižek's argument that the critique of instrumental reason, such as the one developed by the Frankfurt School, can only derive from the critique of the capitalist logic of integration and transformation of surplus into valorized excess, should be endorsed. An example of how the university discourse functions today is the obfuscation of the term "worker" and the consequent erasure of the theme of class exploitation, which is as a rule replaced by the multiculturalist topic of "victimisation". Instead of focusing their attention on exploitation in connection with the formation of surplus-value, the media describe workers either as "victims" losing their jobs as a consequence of a crisis (or an unpredictable calamity), or as "immigrant workers". What in both cases is ignored is the basic truth that our entire social system relies on the extraction of surplus-value (whether material or immaterial) from the worker. A clear indicator of this state of affairs is the despicable and grotesque fact that, to gain a modicum of visibility, today's workers are forced to take increasingly radical measures. To make sure that their protest against their precarious conditions attracts the attention of the media, they more and more frequently resort to extreme acts such as barricading themselves on factory roofs or abducting their bosses. While the inane "gossip culture" reigns undisturbed in all newspapers and TV stations, workers have to put their lives at risk to show the world that they exist. And the ultimate irony, which adds insult to injury, is that the undignified

way through which they achieve visibility means that they are tagged as generic victims of an ineffable fate rather than human beings exploited through work – regardless of the fact that their subjective position, inasmuch as it is internal to the capitalist dynamics of value, is not intrinsically subversive.

To sum up the "Marxist" problem with Hardt and Negri, we could say that they celebrate the disruptive, decentring potential of global capitalism, while arguing that the real predicament lies in the *form* of capitalism, namely the fact that its "liberating" potential is neutralized and indeed cancelled out in the private-property appropriation of the surplus. Hence they believe it is enough to acknowledge that the capitalist relations of production (the hierarchical structure of capitalism) is already being undermined for the productive forces to unleash their revolutionary potential. Marx's "error", which Hardt and Negri inherit, was to think that capitalism already contains in itself the seeds of a higher order (communism), insofar as the spiral of productivity of capitalism only needed to be "adjusted" through the elimination of its inherent contradiction (surplus-value, profit) for the advent of free and full productivity. Žižek concludes:

> So the critics of Communism were in a way right when they claimed that the Marxian Communism is an impossible fantasy – what they did not perceive is that Marxian Communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity *outside* the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust to productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the "obstacles" and antagonisms that were – as the sad experience of the "really existing capitalism" demonstrates – *the only possible framework of the effective material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity.* (Žižek 2001a: 19)

Chapter 5

# Karatani's wager

Kojin Karatani's key political speculation is that capitalism can be undermined only through consumers' self-organizations, i.e. intervening strategically at the level of commodity circulation. He claims that at least since 1848 any hope in labour-led revolutions has proved unrealistic, to the extent that it is unthinkable today that workers become the subject of class struggle on the production front, since they are completely co-opted within the capitalist discourse. Karatani's overall point is that the production process *in itself* is ill-suited to convey hope in the overthrow of capitalism. What the historical turn to consumerism has highlighted is that workers are fundamentally *passive as producers* and *active as consumers*, which means that intervening at the level of production can, at best, lead to the improvement of workers' conditions in contractual terms. However, the improved conditions of the working class in one nation or continent determine an increase of poverty elsewhere – a clear indicator of the world market's systemic violence.[1] With this in mind, the following excerpt from Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* remains instructive:

> Under the conditions of integration, the new political consciousness of the vital need for radical change emerges among social groups which, on objective grounds, are (relatively) free from the integrating, conservative interests and aspirations, free for the radical transvaluation of values. Without losing its historical role as the basic force of transformation, the working class, in the period of stabilization, assumes a stabilizing, conservative function; and the catalysts of transformation operate "from without". (Marcuse 1972: 60)

Already in 1850s Britain, the working class started being absorbed by the bourgeoning consumerist culture, which is why the prominent thinker of the left was a social democrat like John Stuart Mill. It is with this awareness that Marx wrote *Capital*: 'The dialectic that identifies wage-labor as a version

of slave or serf and concludes with the victory of the laborers is obsolete. And Marx sought to think of the capitalist economy and its sublation totally differently' (Karatani 2005: 287) – i.e., via the prospect of the crisis of capitalism (instead of revolution) arising from the gap between production and circulation.[2] However, Karatani acknowledges that crises are also an integral part of the system, allowing capital to invest in technological innovation and 'travel around the world looking for cheaper labour power' (251).

## The reflexive determination of surplus-value

We should first concede that Karatani's argument against the alleged revolutionary potential of the working-class is not merely theorized as a consequence of stifling consumer emasculation, as in much of Western Marxism. If he denies labour any revolutionary force, it is because he maintains that although value (surplus-value) is *created* in the production process, it is *actualized* as profit only when the commodity is sold and the circle M-C-M' (Money-Commodity-Profit/Capital) is completed. Against the focus on production as the privileged site of truth typical of much Marxism, and at the same time in sharp contrast to the Western Marxist fixation on the ideological manipulation effected by consumerist culture, Karatani sees the sphere of commodity exchange *as such* as the main battlefield,[3] which is why he calls for its reconfiguration. As Žižek puts it in his commentary on *Transcritique*, '[t]his temporal gap between the production of value and its actualization is crucial: even if value is produced in production, without the successful completion of the process of circulation, there is *stricto sensu* no value' (Žižek 2006b: 52). Žižek is here referring to Karatani's key notion of the parallax, conceived in strict connection with the paradox embodied by value. What we perceive as constituted in production (value) is in truth the product of exchange, for without the latter the former is invalidated:

> the temporality here is that of the *futur antérieur*: value "is" not immediately, it only "will have been", it is retroactively actualized, performatively enacted. In production, value is generated "in itself", while only through the completed circulation process does it become "for itself". (Žižek 2006b: 52)

Borrowing, as we shall see, from Kant's paradigmatic notion of transcendental apperception, Karatani claims that in itself the value of a commodity does not exist,[4] since it is determined in a system of relations with other

commodities – which is why the price of the same product differs from country to country, or even within the same country (Karatani 2005: 228). He emphasizes that the 'event' of the formation of surplus-value is 'invisible to each participant', since M-C-M' is split into M-C and C-M' – which 'occur in different times and places' (231). Production and consumption obey different spatio-temporal logics and engage different actors, which is what confers upon surplus-value the status of parallax. Surplus-value is thus conceived as the invisible transcendental link between two different surface phenomena:[5] M-C (production) and C-M' (circulation). From this premise, Karatani argues that the only way to successfully contrast capitalist power is to intervene at the level of circulation, preventing surplus-value from actualizing into profit.

Drawing on what I have argued so far apropos surplus, we are now in a position to see how Karatani's thesis that value has the status of a parallax – insofar as it represents the irreducible tension between production and circulation – actually runs deeper than it seems. What one should also add is that, precisely because value is a purely formal determination, in itself non-existent, it always-already operates *reflexively*, i.e. within each of the two surface phenomena (production and circulation) from whose tension it results. This means that Karatani's branding of surplus-value as a Kantian transcendental apperception needs to be carried through to its decisive Hegelian consequence: the transcendental distortion originally belongs to and disturbs its immanent sources, that is, each of the two branches of the capitalist process. In brief, what Karatani's analysis does not include is the Hegelian move called "reflexive determination". In the same way in which Hegel claims that Christianity, for instance, is a reflexive determination of Judaism (for the Jewish concept of the transcendent, inaccessible power of God is conceived in Christianity as human freedom qua love),[6] we need to think the surplus form of value as reflected back in both production and circulation as their very immanent distortion. To start with, the formation of surplus-value, the moment of its initial constitution, is sustained by the disavowal of the constitutive excess of work that Lacan named surplus-*jouissance*. Then, in a different spatiotemporal context, the operation of exchange which actualizes surplus-value is itself sustained by the disavowal of *jouissance* qua lack and consequent hypostatization of what we have called ersatz-enjoyment. As one can see, surplus-value as transcendental parallax reflects back into its two correlated determinations, both of which have the status of an immanent parallax: while in production we have the irreducible tension between surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance* qua unconscious knowledge-at-work, at the level of circulation this parallax morphs into the tension between valorized (ersatz) enjoyment and surplus-*jouissance* qua lack and exclusion.

## From production to exclusion, and back

Let us now further analyse these two parallaxes in their different contexts. In production, as amply discussed in the previous chapters, the parallax is represented by the dichotomy concerning the surplus implicit in knowledge-at-work and its surreptitious transmutation into value, an operation involving the sharp separation of manual and intellectual labour. In circulation, the gap in question is substantially different, concerning the cleavage between the consumer's perception of enjoyment as fullness, which allows capital to complete its cycle and realize itself, and the correlation between *jouissance* and lack which, if actively assumed and/or politicized, would seriously threaten the capitalist logic. The first parallax is therefore one that can be appreciated only by (subtracted) workers, for they alone have, hypothetically, a chance to re-appropriate their knowledge against its valorization. The second, on the other hand, can be perceived by consumers, a category which of course includes also workers, inasmuch as under capitalism they are enslaved twice. On this evidence, my point, which reverses Karatani's thesis, is that if there is a privileged ground from which to begin to challenge capitalist dynamics it remains that of production. Only through work do we become aware of the surplus inherent to knowledge in its psychoanalytic connotation. Although this work can also be conceptualized as the Lacanian practice of "going through one's fantasy", what I have in mind here is the specific reference to the "surplus of material work" that, as we have seen, runs through *Seminar XVII*. To mark a contrast with the orthodox Marxist line, however, it must be stressed that this surplus would only be available to a labour-power that has successfully subtracted from capitalist dynamics, or has never had to fully submit to it. In other words, the workers who can make a substantial difference are those belonging to the increasing numbers of "living dead", whose labour-power has not yet entered the cycle of capitalist valorization. Radical leftist politics should reclaim these workers from the defeatist view that they are either already co-opted or they merely constitute the reserve army of capital. On the contrary, they are capital's excremental remainder, the inert human debris engendered by the spiralling pursuit of surplus-value.[7]

Stating that surplus-value is realized when workers buy back what they produce (Karatani 2005: 20) is not enough, for if we go down that road we bypass the *complexity* of what takes place in production. As we have seen, this complexity does not only concern the expropriation of labour time, but most crucially the spoliation of surplus-*jouissance*. By focusing the analysis on circulation, Karatani overlooks the initial stage that leads to commodity

exchange/fetishism. Consequently, he fails to consider the parallactic nature of the commodity itself. What matters here is to stress that the commodity bought back by the workers is not "all there is", i.e. it cannot be regarded as the final outcome of capitalist dynamics. Rather, instead of stopping at circulation these dynamics are not without their own unaccounted for and unaccountable residue, their own external surplus, which is fully detached and meaningless from the perspective of capital itself. This residue is what Lacan identified, recurring to Marx and Engels' term, as lumpenproletariat, in spite of the fact that neither Marx nor Engels accorded it any positive political potential. If we agree that the key step to undermine the capitalist order is to link back consumption to production with the aim of politicizing the original parallax taking place within the latter, this step should be complemented by the politicization of the external remainder of capitalist dynamics. The critical analysis of how capitalism manages to reproduce itself by valorizing and concealing its internal excess is meaningful only if accompanied by a political project centred on the organization of what capitalism produces and yet has no control over, namely the dislocated masses of "human waste" resulting from endless profiteering. More precisely, what we need to politicize is the connection between surplus qua knowledge-at-work and the lumpenproletariat as the human surplus of the profiteering logic of capital. Ultimately, we are dealing with the same surplus observed in different contexts: the knowledge extracted from the worker, i.e. the foundational surplus of any signifying operation whatsoever, returns at the end of the cycle as the structural, indigestible surplus of capitalist dynamics. From this perspective, then, Karatani's thesis that intervention must take place at the level of circulation needs to be thoroughly re-articulated: in order to arrive at an alternative mode of exchange and consumption, it is imperative to repoliticize radically the connection between work and exclusion.[8] Furthermore, we should keep in mind another decisive factor that Karatani seems to ignore. As claimed by Korkotsides, consumerist alienation is all-pervasive:

> It is important to note that alienation on the consumption front starts earlier in one's life than alienation through production. It starts when a child acquires the skills and psychological disposition for aggressive, insatiable consumption that reflects the angst of the elders that surround it. (Korkotsides 2007: 33)

Currently, the main obstacle to any reconceptualization of the function of work is represented by the advent of financial capitalism, which has relegated

the material side of production (and therefore exploitation) to invisibility. Karatani reminds us that Marx had indeed predicted today's "casino capitalism": 'all nations characterized by the capitalist mode of production are periodically seized by fits of giddiness in which they try to accomplish the money-making without the mediation of the production process' (Marx 1978: 137). This, of course, is not meant to suggest that production does not take place. The basic formula of capitalism (M-C-M'), and therefore its structure, remains the same in all its stages of development (mercantilism, liberalism, imperialism and late capitalism), despite what might appear as profound shifts in its constitution. Although in late capitalism hard labour is increasingly obscured by soft labour, at the heart of it all we still find the original modus operandi of merchant capital, which, to put it simply, consists in the production of surplus-value through exploitation. To this we should add that, as Karatani notes, the inconsistency of global financial capital (its so-called "bubbles") is the same inconsistency (parallax) that drives the real, "substantial" capitalist economy (Karatani 2005: 241).

My central contention is therefore that the only way to bring back the focus on work and exploitation is to theorize a new link between production and the human surplus engendered by the mad escalation of capitalist dynamics. Against all odds, this is perhaps today's crucial historical opportunity. More precisely: the existence of exploited workers and the formation of value in factories or sweatshops is still the key to understanding the actualization of surplus-value in the stock-exchange. Rather than just politicizing production *within* capitalist dynamics, however, we should dare to intervene *creatively* by linking the political question concerning the "production parallax" to the other political question concerning the excluded masses in urgent need of organization. Capitalism produces surplus-value by concealing the real surplus, but it simultaneously reproduces this real surplus in the form of "human waste". Today, the fate of millions of slum-dwellers, as well as our own, depends on an intervention in the production process which rethinks the strategic role of its constitutive surplus, thus simultaneously preparing the ground for an alternative mode of exchange and consumption.

Karatani's thesis that the profiteering logic of capital (at the level of circulation) cannot be opposed to "substantial" productive activity insofar as it shares with it the same imbalance and therefore the same reproductive and ever-expanding logic, is to be fully endorsed and yet taken a step further. Attention should be brought to the evidence that these "coincidental imbalances" *materialize* into a residual and entropic object which capitalism is unable to integrate in the socio-symbolic order it constructs.

With Karatani, the emphasis falls on what Marx called the *salto mortale* performed by the commodity the moment it is sold, thus realizing its value which, as Marx stressed through his reading of Bailey, enjoys a purely relational status; thus it does not exist in itself but only if inserted into a system of equivalence with other commodities. As Žižek never tires of repeating, Marx had indeed realized that the enigma of the commodity lies in its form, just as Freud realized that the enigma of dreams lies in the specific formal distortion they assume. I argue, however, that on this point both Karatani and Žižek stop too soon at the form of the commodity and its relational status. What Lacan's analysis permits us to see is that the very form of the commodity, which sets up its value and by the same token its bottomless enigma, has its roots in the original act of extraction and subsequent valorization of surplus-*jouissance*. Although this act does not disclose for us the magnitude of the commodity in terms of its specific value (there is of course no direct link between the quantity of surplus-*jouissance* and the value of the commodity, since they are both by definition uncountable entities) the thesis on the connection between the formal enigma of the commodity and the original surplus extracted from the worker is nevertheless to be endorsed.

## Kant with Marx?

In an attempt to align Marx with Kant and thus argue against the idea that the framework of *Capital* is intimately Hegelian, Karatani suggests that the main merit of Marx has been that of focusing on the inherent limit of capitalism, just like Kant had focused on the inherent limit of human reason, particularly in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: 'What Kant really did [. . .] was to present the boundaries of limits of human subjective faculties, and in so doing criticize metaphysics as an arrogation that oversteps those boundaries' (Karatani 2005: 34). When in his little known text 'Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics' Kant wrote of the 'pronounced parallax' resulting from adding to my perspective 'the position of another's reason outside of myself', he was attempting to prevent 'optical delusion', thus rectifying the meaning of human knowledge (Kant quoted in Karatani 2005: 47). Far from merely voicing the relativistic postmodern cliché that one should empathize with the other's point of view (or narrative), Kant's stance here, Karatani argues, ought to be measured against his groundbreaking notion of parallax, nicely exemplified by the split in reflection between the mirror image and the photograph. While in my mirror image the objectivity of the view is still marred by my complicity with my own

subjective perspective, in a photograph of myself I am confronted by a much more alien type of objectivity – which is why we often find photographs weirdly non-coincidental with the image we had of ourselves (just like when we hear our recorded voice).[9] This distortion, Karatani argues, is the Kantian parallax, which, if grasped in philosophical terms, testifies to the fact that, rather than hypostatizing subjectivity, 'Kant attempted to implode the complicity inherent in introspection precisely by *confining* himself to the introspective framework' (49). What is at stake in the Kantian parallax is not so much subjectivity per se, or a mere transcendental reflection, but the epistemological attempt to show how otherness impacts on thought. Ultimately, it is the introduction of this alien otherness, or alterity, that determines the Kantian revolutionary turn; though not in the sense that it introduces relativism into thinking, but because it functions as the necessary condition enabling the act of thought. This is clearly the Kantian problem *par excellence*, as the pronounced parallax embodying otherness will emerge later in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* taking up the form of antinomy, whereby both thesis and antithesis are regarded as "optical illusions". This means that one can only exercise the faculty of thought on condition that the act of thinking "in itself" is fraught with an inerasable formal surplus, which Kant calls "transcendental apperception". The Kantian parallax is therefore the gap or distortion separating the "empirical I", able to experience itself thinking, from the "formal I" of transcendental apperception, which as such is necessary and yet unable to apprehend itself. In Žižek's view, this point remains ambiguous in Kant, for

> it is not sufficient to say about the I of pure apperception that 'of it, apart from them [the thoughts which are its predicates], we cannot have any concept whatsoever' (CPR [*Critique of Pure Reason*], A 346). One has to add that *this lack of intuited content is constitutive of the I; the inaccessibility to the I of its own "kernel of being" makes it an I.* This is what Kant is not quite clear about, which is why he again and again yields to the temptation of conceiving of the relationship between the I of pure apperception and the I of self-experience as the relationship between a Thing-in-itself and an experiential phenomenon. (Žižek 1993: 14)

The subtle logic at work here is the following: I am able to engage in thinking empirical matters only insofar as I am unable to perceive myself as "thing-in-itself that thinks" – or, differently put, as the empty formal cognitive framework. The Kantian turn can be brought down to the identification of this parallax whereby empirical reflection (self-consciousness) is

sustained by its own epistemological limit qua transcendental apperception. The reason why Žižek prefers to link Kant to Lacan rather than Marx is that he sees in this limit qua condition of possibility of self-consciousness the Lacanian Real (or Freud's unconscious): 'The paradox of self-consciousness is that *it is possible only against the background of its own impossibility*: I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being' (Žižek 1993: 15). While Karatani is aware of this logic, he does not seem to realize how it problematizes his appraisal of Marx, since it *de facto* points to the evidence that the inherent limit of capital is simultaneously its condition of possibility. What Karatani praises as the key contribution of Marx's critique of capital – his "Kantian" understanding of capitalist profiteering (surplus-value as transcendental apperception) – is in effect what functions as capital's ultimate strength. Furthermore, he also seems to ignore another key consequence of Kant's turn, which Žižek spells out in unambiguous terms.

Žižek agrees with Karatani that Kant introduced the question of otherness into metaphysics, thus inaugurating modern thought. However, he also argues that it was Hegel who brought Kant's thought to face its disavowed consequences. These consequences can be summed up in the view that the subject's reflections and the alien otherness represented by the empty form of thought, which is operative in these reflections, are always intertwined. In addition, if thought is by definition decentred and inconsistent, this is true also of the object of knowledge – the displacement of one's perception of the external world is also what characterizes the external world:

> all Hegel does is, in a way, to supplement Kant's well-known motto of the transcendental constitution of reality ("the conditions of possibility of our knowledge are at the same time the conditions of possibility of the object of our knowledge") by its negative – the limitation of our knowledge (its failure to grasp the Whole of Being, the way our knowledge gets inexorably entangled in contradictions and inconsistencies) is simultaneously the limitation of the very object of our knowledge, that is, the gaps and voids in our knowledge of reality are simultaneously the gaps and voids in the "real" ontological edifice itself. [. . .] Hegel's point here is very precise: not only do the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions of our knowledge not prevent it from functioning as "true" knowledge of reality, but there is "reality" (in the most usual sense of "hard external reality" as opposed to "mere notions") only in so far as the domain of the Notion is alienated from itself, split, traversed by some radical deadlock, caught in some debilitating inconsistency. (Žižek 2000a: 55–6)

For Karatani, the overarching structure of *Capital* is not Hegelian. Rather, insofar as it 'reveals the fact that capital, though organizing the world, can never go beyond its own limit', it should be read as 'a Kantian critique of the ill-contained drive of capital/reason to self-realize beyond its limit' (Karatani 2005: 9). Once again, it is worth pointing out that Karatani misses the Hegelian (and implicitly Kantian) correlation and co-dependence of limit and self-realization. To put it bluntly: it is not that capital attempts to overcome its limit, but that it uses its limit to expand, to realize itself as capital.

## Morality and associations

Karatani's next step concerns the effort to solve what he sees as the Kantian problem broached by Marx. Following Kant, he argues that morality is the only solution to the ontological deadlock of thought. From a Marxian angle, Kant's moral law provides a potential way out of the epistemological impasse embodied by capital. Karatani goes so far as to claim that for Marx 'communism was a Kantian categorical imperative, that is, practical and moral par excellence'. As for those 'mainstream Marxists' who 'derided morality' and instead 'advocated "historical necessity" and "scientific socialism" ', Karatani liquidates them with the remark that they 'ended up constituting a new type of slave society' (Karatani 2005: xii). It is easy to discern how the choice of morality in Karatani is consequential to what he perceives as the "optical illusion" of capital, the fact that profit is sustained by the invisible transcendental apperception called value. For this reason he resorts to the image of the parallax to locate not only the origins of Kant's critical thought but especially the surplus that drives capital forward and demands the intervention of a moral stance to realize an alternative economic model. However, this Kantian recourse to morality risks playing the same role as that of religion for Marx: an image of salvation *from* contradictions rather than *through* them (hence the divergence between Kant's and Hegel's conceptions of religion). Here we should recall Lacan's precise remark that morality emerged historically as a "desperate" philosophical attempt to neutralize the indivisible surplus produced by discourse (see Lacan 2007: 175). Aristotle, for instance, could not fathom the relationship between master and slave because he did not know how to conceive of its parallax, its unsolvable antagonism, which is why he wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*. What mattered most to Aristotle and pre-modern thought in general was to safeguard the proper measure of desire against its inherently excessive character. With Kant, however, a new epoch began, where morality, far

from merely securing the stability of the pleasure principle, stood paradoxically for a crushing pressure that shatters any preconceived harmony. As Lacan showed in his 'Kant avec Sade', Kant's moral law qua duty ultimately coincides with the very unbearable, explosive contradiction it aims to appease (see Lacan 2006: 645–68). In Žižek's well-known quotation from G. K. Chesterton, morality embodies 'the most dark and daring of conspiracies' (Žižek 2008b: 55).

To understand Karatani's political use of morality we need to start from his attack on the trinity capitalism-nation-state. This attack shares in the Žižekian conviction that the liberal-democratic state and capital are two sides of the same coin. The state has always accompanied and defended the developments of capitalism, it has never been on leave. The problem with Gramsci and Foucault, Karatani argues, is that they see the state as either civil society or immanent power because they only see it from within, i.e. they miss the crucial detail that the state exists in competition with other states, and the competition is about capital: 'No matter how social democratic the state appears within itself, it is hegemonic to its exteriority – namely, even under the slogan of "humanitarian intervention" ' (Karatani 2005: 275). And again:

> It was amid the bourgeois revolution that these three were *officially* married. As in the trinity intoned in the French revolution [. . .] capital, state, and nation copulated and amalgamated themselves into a force that was inseparable ever after. Hence the modern state must be called, sensu strictu, the capitalist nation-state. They were made to be mutually complementary, reinforcing each other. When economic liberty becomes excessive and class conflict is sharpened, the state intervenes to redistribute wealth and regulate the economy, and at the same time, the emotion of national unity (mutual aid) fills up the cracks. When facing this fearless trinity, undermining one or the other does not work. (278–79)

Such fierce critique, also aimed at traditional revolutionary politics, is launched in the name of "associations", essentially conceived by Karatani as producer and consumer cooperatives whose chief strategic goal is to undermine all three terms of the above trinity. Marx's *Capital* itself, according to Karatani, contains a plea for this type of exchange, beyond and in spite of the distortions of those who took it both in the direction of social-democracy and Leninism. Although Marx saw the limits of cooperatives, especially when in competition with capital, it was in them alone, inasmuch as they were not protected by the state but independent creations of workers,

that he recognized the potential realization of communism. Convinced that one would be hard-pressed to find in *Capital* any clue that capitalism will end autotelically and apodictically – as well as any realistic revolutionary pledge – Karatani turns towards the possibility of challenging the optical illusion of capital by contrasting surplus-value at the level of exchange and consumption. For him it is only at that level that workers can intervene as subjects, insofar as they are in a position to exercise their purchasing power. On the contrary, wage workers are passive, forced to sell their labour power even in conditions (sweatshops) where they are still directly enslaved to a master. In the course of his perspicacious analysis, however, Karatani fails to acknowledge the existence of those indigent masses excluded from the process of consumerist subjectivation: 'it is only a matter of inevitability that workers can only engage in the economic struggle where they negotiate with capitalists over their commodity value' (293). Hence his conclusion that transnational associations between workers and consumers are indispensable. The idea is 'to develop a circulation system using local currency, and thereby to nurture producers'/consumers' cooperatives and connect them to those in the First World. This would be noncapitalist trade and could form a network without the mediation of states' (295).

However, to put it bluntly, is the principle behind this project not idealistic? Can the formation of a "black box" at the level of circulation really prevent the intervention of capital or state? Karatani's project draws on Michael Linton's LETS (Local Exchange Trading System), a system of settlements inaugurated in 1982 where participants have accounts, offer services and wealth and freely conduct exchanges, recording results in inventories. Everything 'is so organized that the sum total of the gains and loses of everyone be zero'. In principle it does solve the antinomy of money, creating a mixture of market and mutual aid: in LETS money does not transform into capital 'because it is based upon the zero sum principle (the principle of offsetting earnings and expenses in sum total)'. The currency used is 'a general equivalent, which however just connects all the goods and services and does not become an autonomous, autotelic drive' (298–99). Karatani's confidence that LETS should be heralded as an exciting example of economico-ethical associationism underlies his belief that the antinomy of money (or the parallax of value) can be solved by preventing money from becoming capital. From a Lacanian perspective, however, this task can only appear idealistic, since it would lead directly to the chimera of a self-transparent society. That is to say: the proposal to have communitarian associations of producers/consumers modelled on LETS does not eliminate surplus as we have described it, for the very moment production takes place,

this surplus is automatically set in motion as the "indivisible remainder" of the subject's immersion in the socio-symbolic order. What is therefore missing from Karatani's analysis is the question of how to deal with the Real of *jouissance*. His proposed solution typically does away with the original quandary, which Žižek, following Lacan, confronts by calling for the necessity of installing new master-signifiers, that is to say signifiers which dare to assume upon themselves the invisible weight of surplus-*jouissance*.[10]

Lacan avers that to recognize a master-signifier we need to be able to decipher 'something that spreads throughout language like a wildfire [. . .] that is to say, how it hooks on, creates a discourse' (Lacan 2007: 189). It is precisely by turning the angst-ridden, burdensome surplus-*jouissance* into a wildfire that a master-signifier stitches together the constitutive fragmentation of the social, thus creating a discourse. At this level, the problem with Karatani's critique does not differ a great deal from the problem with the standard postmodern critique of power – what is overlooked is not simply the *topos* of the "necessity of power", but more precisely the insight into how power *by definition* (i.e. no matter how "democratic") hinges on the mobilization of an unconscious surplus: 'the law can only sustain its authority if subjects hear in it the echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion' (Žižek 2008a: 378). Here it is worth noting that Karatani's political answer to the surplus of power is properly irrational: instead of elections (democratic parliamentarism), he suggests instituting a lottery to decide who is temporarily in charge of associations. This solution would take us beyond the capitalist state and yet answer the need for centralized power to coordinate operations. The function of this centre would be 'just like transcendental apperception X and not something substantial [. . .] the associations would be united by a central committee consisting of a representative of each dimension' (Karatani 2005: 306). Retrospectively, this solution confirms the strictly speaking irredeemable dimension of the task in hand. The deliberate irrationality of the lottery adumbrates and yet fails to confront the unconscious element at work in any social discourse, and consequently in any situation concerning power. Put differently, Karatani conceives the devilish *jouissance* of power as innocent, angelic irrationality, a distortion which belies the idealism of his project.[11]

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Chapter 6

# On shame and subversion

'Don't make such a long face, you are being served, you can say that there is no longer any shame' (Lacan 2007: 182). Controlled by a perverted master, the university discourse demands social identification for the sake of what is emphatically promoted as "knowledge" and endorsed as the "prohibition to prohibit" (permissiveness). Perversion lies in hiding mastery under culture, knowledge, as well as generalized permissiveness, and *not feeling any shame for it*. The university credit-point system,[1] newly introduced in France at the time of *Seminar XVII*, is for Lacan the latest piece of evidence that the mass production and consumption of knowledge has eliminated the subversive potentiality inscribed in what could be referred to as shame. For Lacan, shame stands for the possibility of experiencing *jouissance* as that which makes one worthy of being "a signifier that represents the subject for another signifier". As Jacques-Alain Miller succinctly put it: 'The disappearance of shame means that the subject ceases to be represented by a signifier that matters' (Miller 2006: 18). But why did Lacan choose to refer to shame? If he was aware that by the end of the 1960s the Weberian link between the puritanical ethics of Protestantism and capital had grown insufficient to explain the logic of the latter, did he advocate a return to prohibition to counteract what Freud had named "the discontent of civilisation"? This, of course, would amount to the ultimate misreading of Lacan.

## Shame, sister of *jouissance*

Lacan's problem with 1968 is the problem that concerns us all today: the enemy of subversive politics is no longer repression, i.e. how to deal with a repressive power that thwarts and constrains our spontaneous self-expression and creative longing for ever new freedoms. On the contrary, the first step to create the conditions for change rests on our ability to locate the historical potential for a disconnection with the capitalist imperative to

"express ourselves" and "realize our innermost desires". The emancipatory step away from compulsive enjoyment requires that, to put it in the terms of Žižek's specific "hauntology", we join arms with those "living dead" who already populate our socio-symbolic space in growing numbers. This alliance must be aimed at the construction of a new subjectivity grounded in a new strategic relationship with that surplus which we have identified at the level of production. In this context, our immediate goal – the goal that Žižek has described as "Bartleby politics" – should be to *gain a distance* from the relentless and obscene (shameless) call to participate creatively and proactively in a system whose only goal is to reproduce itself and, "collaterally", global misery. Agency for Žižek effectively means that the struggle for emancipation cannot bypass the zero-level dimension embodied by the figure of the "living dead" – it cannot bypass shame.

But, again, what is shame? For Žižek, 'I am ashamed when I am confronted with the excess in my body' (Žižek 2005a: 169), an excess which, as Miller suggests, might manifest itself 'independently of anything of the order of misdeed, harm, or transgression that might give rise to it'. Thus, it could be said that 'guilt is related to desire, whereas shame is related to the jouissance' (Miller 2006: 13). While transgressing a prohibition produces guilt, shame proper emerges when we expose the innermost core of our selves to the gaze of the other, i.e. when *jouissance* pops up to disturb our peaceful immersion in the socio-symbolic order.[2] It is this *jouissance* that needs to be located and re-politicized. When lamenting "the end of shame", Lacan is not advocating the classic conservative defence of morality, traditional values and fixed social positions. He is describing two simultaneous situations: (1) the problem posed by capitalism qua discourse of the university is that it reduces the availability of *jouissance*, thus drastically limiting the potential for subjective distancing from the dominant discourse; (2) shame nevertheless continues to exist and retain its revolutionary force, but only in connection with those subjects who, in the guise of Antigone or Oedipus, find themselves "in between the two deaths", i.e. dead to the symbolic order and, as a result, in principle available for another (new) mode of subjectivation. Thus, the definition of shame as "the exposure of the excess of one's body" clearly needs to be extended to "the excess of the social body": shame as a social category means that we are confronted with the "excremental remainder" of our horizon of meaning, that is to say with its excluded surplus, from which the new can emerge.

Let us bear in mind that from the standpoint of such categories as *jouissance*, drive and shame, the intervention of prohibition amounts to a false and short-lived relief, a partial recalibration to the pleasure principle.

*Jouissance*, on the other hand, is coterminus with the figure of the living dead precisely in occupying a place beyond the pleasure principle. This has important consequences for the question of subjectivation. Essentially, Žižek relies on Lacan because *jouissance*, impervious as it is to the postmodernist capitulation to finitude and ethical relativism, paradoxically enjoins us to emphasize the importance of subjective autonomy and responsibility: 'insofar as the subject occupies the place of the lack in the Other (symbolic order), it can perform separation (the operation which is the opposite of alienation), and suspend the reign of the big Other, in other words, separate itself from it' (Žižek 2005a: 137). Crucial here is the coincidence of subjective autonomy (separation) and the constitutive alienation in the Other that marks my existence, since the fact that I exist only in my osmotic link with the substantial and impenetrable Other is also what grounds my freedom, i.e. the potential to disconnect from my alienation and reconfigure my existence in a new social link, which will be based on a *formally identical* but *substantially different* type of alienation. For Lacan, and Žižek, freedom expresses itself through *jouissance*, and as such it is connoted as a negative gesture, as my capacity to say 'No!' to my participation in a given symbolic context:

> Of course, I cannot undo the substantial weight of the context into which I am thrown; of course, I cannot penetrate the opaque background of my being; but what I can do is, in an act of negativity, "cleanse the plate", draw a line, exempt myself, step out of the symbolic in a "suicidal" gesture of a radical act – what Freud called "death drive" and what German Idealism called "radical negativity". (140)

The leitmotif of Žižek's notion of agency is that these passages through the negativity of freedom/*jouissance* present themselves as single historical opportunities signalling the breaking up of the symbolic context and the possibility of its resignification. At this level he fully shares Badiou's contention against "vulgar Marxism" that "History does not exist" as it is an abstract notion. Instead, we have the historicity of evental sites from whose specific contingency alone it is possible to think and programme revolutionary action (Badiou 2007b: 173–77).

## Redemption from work and its consequences

For the moment, however, let us continue with Lacan's critique of the university discourse, which, as we have seen, relates to the workers being

stripped of their know-how. While the rich are masters because 'they have redeemed themselves' from work (Lacan 2007: 82), the workers have lost their command over manual labour and, as a result, have also entered the redeemed world of the wealthy. For Lacan, any *redemption* is an illusion, since *jouissance* is inerasable. His point is very subtle and much more sophisticated than the classic Western Marxist thesis according to which the working class has been mollified by mass culture and consumerist ideology. What he asserts is that workers have lost the only quality that could make their position subversive, that is, the implicitly antagonistic substance generated by "knowledge-set-to-work" prior to the universalization of knowledge supervised by the university discourse. With the advent of the scientific discourse of the university, he probes, 'can know-how at the level of manual labor carry enough weight to be a subversive factor?' (Lacan 2007: 149). This emphasis on manual labour is of paramount importance, for it points to a dimension where the weight of work, indeed what he calls 'the truth of labor', can again acquire a subversive potential. In class struggle everything hinges on the appropriation of *objet a*. The moment this surplus is promoted to 'the level at which the function of the wealthy operates, the one for which knowledge is only a tool of exploitation' (Lacan 2007: 83), subversion can only be conceived as the attempt to link the weighty truth of labour to our traumatic failure to appropriate it. It is in this context that we should place Žižek's attempt to politicize "subjective destitution", the seemingly crazy idea that revolutionary violence must be, first and foremost, self-directed, aiming at our own attachment to what we regard as our (class) enemy. If anything, since the global success of capitalism the structural necessity of this traumatic "first step" has become even more pressing. Kojève, in his reading of Hegel, had already grasped this dilemma. To speak of class struggle from within the capitalist universe, he claimed, is strictly speaking incorrect, since we are all, despite differences in status, defined by our "bourgeois" subjectivity. A parallax view of the whole question would thus reveal that the classic war between masters and slaves has become the struggle of the pseudo-slaves/masters against themselves, i.e. *aimed at their liberation from themselves*:

> The Bourgeois is neither Slave nor Master; he is – being the Slave of Capital – his *own* Slave. It is from himself, therefore, that he must free himself. And this is why the liberating risk of life takes the form not of risk on the field of battle, but of the risk created by Robespierre's Terror. The working Bourgeois, turned Revolutionary, himself creates the situation that introduces into him the element of death. And it is only thanks to the

> Terror that the idea of the final Synthesis, which definitely "satisfies" Man, is realized. (Kojève 1980: 69)

If we discard Kojève's pseudo-Hegelian thesis that the French Revolution brought about the final synthesis and realization of man, we should no doubt retain the properly Hegelian emphasis on the self-reflexive dimension of the struggle, based on the double insight that the enemy/other is always-already in us, since we are always-already included in the "big picture". In Lacanian terms this means that the hidden master of the university discourse is much stronger than the traditional master, since the fundamental impotence arising from the conjunction between master and truth ($S_1$ and $\$$) has been emptied, i.e. turned into the conjunction $S_2$and $S_1$: mastery is now in the hands of knowledge. This emphasis on how the capitalist big Other not only exists, but is becoming the increasingly unassailable, invisible, naturalized ground of our existence, is crucial, for it brings us back to the necessity of dialectics, insofar as the Hegelian dialectics rekindled by Žižek are unambiguously founded on the pre-eminence of negativity, or history's radical contingency. This could even be stated as a case of "dialectics against fascism": the immediate reason why today we need dialectics is to remind ourselves that an idea of modernity in which liberal "democracy" and capitalist "freedom" acquire a universal, grounding authority is coterminous with the emphatic fascistic reliance on the organic primacy of order and balance. Dialectics, on the contrary, reminds us that the ground on which we stand is always akin to the proverbial ground of our nightmares, insofar as it opens up on the abyss. Dialectics re-instates the primacy of contradiction, the violence of negativity, as that which cuts across every ontology of balance.

Now, Lacan asks, what is the possibility that 'things should move a bit' within the university discourse? Although he predicts that 'segregation [. . .] will only ever continue to increase', he adds that 'there is in every case a level at which things do not work out'. It is at that level, the level of *objet a*, that one should keep focusing. Ultimately, however, Lacan's position with regard to subversion is the one voiced by Žižek: *it happens because it must happen.* All one can do, it would seem, is identify and exert pressure on the symptomal points where the inconsistency of the discourse appears most evident:

> If it's one's wish that something turn [. . .] it is certainly not by being progressive, it is simply because it can't prevent itself from turning. If it doesn't turn, it will grind away, there where things raise questions, that is, at the level of putting something into place that can be written as *a.* (Lacan 2007: 178–79)

With regard to shame, Lacan suggests that it corresponds to the concealed hole in the position of the master, a category revealing the presence of a gap in the dominant discourse:

> Today I have brought you the category of shame. It is not a comfortable thing to put forward. It is not one of the easiest things to speak about. This is perhaps what it really is, the hole from which the master signifier arises. If it were, it might perhaps not be useless for measuring how close one has to get to it if one wants to have anything to do with the subversion, or even the rotation, of the master's discourse. (189)

In his conclusion, he returns to the key political wager of his seminar, in connection with the events following May '68. The wager is formulated through the juxtaposition of shame and *lumpenproletariat* (instead of proletariat), cemented by a definition of class struggle aimed at correcting Marx's original one. Students should look 'on the other side', the side of those who are truly 'dominated':

> If they search on that side, they may find that with my little schemas they can find a way of justifying that the student is not displaced in feeling a brother, as they say, not of the proletariat but of the lumpen-proletariat. The proletariat are like the Roman plebs – these were very distinguished people. The class struggle perhaps contains this little source of error at the start, that it absolutely doesn't take place at the level of the true dialectic of the master's discourse – it is located on the level of identification. *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. They are on the same side. And the entire Empire includes all the rest. The question is why students feel that they belong with all the rest. They don't at all seem to be able to see clearly how to resolve it. I would like to point out to them that production is one essential point of the system – the production of shame. This translates as – it's impudence. This is why it would perhaps not be a very bad means not to go in that direction. (190)

The rebellious students of May '68, whom Lacan had already accused of being hysterics unwittingly in search of a master,[3] are now encouraged to identify with the "excremental remainder" of the system, a human surplus which represents the shameful excess of production *outside* the scientific production of transgression – and therefore the only place where *objet a* can be identified. Žižek moves along the same lines:

> What one should avoid here is the Foucauldian misreading: the produced subject is not simply the subjectivity which arises as the result of the disciplinary application of knowledge-power, but its remainder, that which eludes the grasp of knowledge-power. "Production" (the fourth term in the matrix of discourses) does not stand simply for the result of the discursive operation, but rather for its "indivisible remainder," for the excess which resists being included in the discursive network, i.e. for what the discourse itself produces as the foreign body in its very heart. (Žižek 2004a: 394)

Let us not forget that within the university discourse the place of production is occupied by $, the barred (excluded) subject, which we are invited to read in connection with the social subject that goes by the name of lumpenproletariat. No wonder Lacan declares himself interested in the Maoist thematic of 'the reference to the knowledge of manual labor'. Despite confessing his lack of preparation on the subject of Maoism, he nevertheless claims that '[t]he renewed emphasis on the knowledge of the exploited seems to me to be very profoundly motivated structurally' (Lacan 2007: 149). This question resonates with the underlying thematic of surplus-*jouissance* as I have tried to develop it in Part 1 of this book, namely as an entropic, disturbing measure of libido attached to any knowledge-at-work. This cardinal question brought up by Lacan towards the end of *Seminar XVII* can be translated as follows: "can we think of a way to re-politicize production so that the workers' knowledge is not dispossessed of its inherent surplus through valorization, but instead tied to a different master-signifier?" Lacan's dismissal of the nationalization of labour in socialist regimes has already been stressed: it stems from the awareness that there the workforce's surplus is also dispossessed and valorized. The Maoist option, on the other hand, intrigues him precisely because, 'unless it is something that is entirely dreamed up' (149), it is aimed at avoiding the initial and crucial stage of capitalist exploitation, i.e. the bifurcation of knowledge and work (or the commodification of the proletariat). Along the same lines, as we have seen, Sohn-Rethel claims that the gap between mental and manual labour would not simply disappear with the abolition of private capital, but would need to be 'consciously liquidated': 'This has never been taken into account in the Soviet Union except in words, whereas it forms a central issue in the construction of socialism in China since the victory of the proletarian cultural revolution' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 169).

What is at stake in these conclusive remarks is not, of course, the anachronistic rehabilitation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Rather, it is my

conviction that what one should carefully consider and retain for a future politics is the effort of thinking together (1) the "human waste" produced by capitalist dynamics, (2) an epistemology of work based on the unity of head and hand and (3) the awareness of the necessity of new master-signifiers replacing the old ones. It is in the connection between these three categories (human waste, knowledge-at-work and master-signifier) that Lacan's notion of surplus-*jouissance* acquires a profound political significance it is worth exploring further.

# Part 2

# The Surplus of Thought

*The world, the world of being, full of knowledge, is but a dream, a dream of the body insofar as it speaks, for there's no such thing as a knowing subject.*

*(Jacques Lacan)*

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Chapter 7

# From subject to politics

Originating in the psychoanalytic paradigm of the split subject at the mercy of unconscious knowledge, Žižek's lesson could initially be seen as a sobering one: since our desires are never our own but always the other's, i.e. they are articulated by the big Other in advance,[1] how can we conceive of freedom and, consequently, our space for action? If even our innermost fantasies are not truly ours, how are we supposed to assert a position of autonomy when it comes to making choices? Are we thus not condemned to a ghostly perambulation in a deterministic universe, forever prevented from understanding the very basic reasons behind our actions? Žižek insists that we are always duped, especially when we believe we are not, since we can never subjectivize, or translate into conscious knowledge, the *jouissance* that binds us to a given symbolic order of meaning. His succinct definition of the ruse of ideology is in this sense exemplary: 'the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it' (Žižek 1994a: 6). Our options would then seem to be melancholically reduced to either accepting being constitutively duped (since our conscious behaviour is anchored in and dependent on unconscious enjoyment) or being duped twice through an illusory endorsement of individual autonomy. If these are the conditions against which our subjective existence is laid out, there cannot be much room for such notions as "hope" and "agency". This, however, is far from the whole story.

## Subject in excess

As well as paying a conspicuous debt to psychoanalysis, Žižek's notion of the subject is strongly influenced by German idealism and, specifically, by an original reading of Hegel. Rejecting the Kantian subject blinded by a transcendent and non-conceptual substance (the Thing-in-itself), Žižek draws on Hegel's Absolute Subject, intending it however not as the "Being of

Beings", the triumphant, pan-logicist culmination of modern metaphysics whose dialectical movement sublates every otherness into its own ideal moment. Rather, he sees the Hegelian subject as a parallax, that is to say marked by the "impossible" substance of the Thing-in-itself which makes its relationship with the external world constitutively antagonistic. If, as Hegel famously put it in the 'Preface' of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, truth should be grasped 'not only as Substance, but equally as Subject' , such truth stands on the axiom that 'Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity' (Hegel 1977: 10). It is vital for Žižek's reading of Hegel to emphasize that ' "subject" is a name for that unfathomable X called upon, suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability', for it is only then, when the subject's utterly contingent and antagonistic core emerges, that the equivalence with Substance ('the objective process governed by some hidden rational Necessity') can be drawn (Žižek 2008c: 189).

From a psychoanalytic angle, Žižek's starting point is that the self must embrace its own otherness (the antagonistic negativity entrenched in the unconscious) to become and recognize itself as subject. In that, he fully shares Hegel's view that 'tarrying with the negative' is 'the magical power' through which the subject comes into being (Hegel 1977: 19). The self-splitting, parallactic view of the Hegelian subject is crucial to grasp Žižek's understanding of the conditions determining our immersion in the socio-symbolic arena. In Hegel, the axis Substance-Subject is predicated upon a 'disparity between the "I" and its object', which is to be intended reflexively as 'the defect of both', and at the same time 'that which moves them' (21). This captures in a nutshell the passage from Kant to Hegel appropriated by Žižek: 'the fissure between us (the subject) and the Absolute, is the very way the Absolute is already with us' (Žižek 2008c: 91). What brings Substance and Subject to coincide is the very splitting, or parallax, that prevents each of the two notions from fully coinciding with themselves: 'the Hegelian "subject" is ultimately nothing but a name for the externality of the Substance to itself, for the "crack" by way of which the Substance becomes "alien" to itself' (Žižek 1993: 30). The same can be said about the classic Lacanian conundrum regarding the relation between the symbolic order and the Real of *jouissance*:

> In "Lituraterre", he [Lacan] finally drops this search for the symbolic pineal gland (the gland which, for Descartes, marks the physical point at which body and soul interact) and endorses the Hegelian solution: *it is the very gap which forever separates S and J that holds them together*, since this gap

> is constitutive of both of them: the Symbolic arises through the gap that separates it from full *jouissance*, and this *jouissance* itself is a specter produced by the gaps and holes in the Symbolic. (Žižek and Milbank 2009: 274)

In this reading of Hegel and Lacan we find the crucial twist at the heart of Žižek's dialectics. To start with, it is a reading that belies the pseudo-idealistic cliché according to which individuals and society, the self and the others, are "islands" forever prevented from truly connecting. Quite on the contrary, Žižek tells us, *we are always connected with the social precisely because we are split*, i.e. because we are never really connected with ourselves. Our being split, "out of joint", implies that the materiality of substance is from the beginning inscribed in our selves – just like when, in the Phrenology section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues that the brain, the organ of consciousness, can be defined only through its relation with the skull, its material container (see Hegel 1977: 185–210). The obvious implication here is that we cannot separate the analysis of the subject from the analysis of the social substance, for the two dimensions are always enmeshed. The otherness of society, with its irredeemably antagonistic nature (in Marxist terms, class struggle), is originally the otherness in me; ultimately, there is no difference between my self-alienation (Lacan's "barred subject", the fact that my unconscious prevents me from accessing the truth about myself) and my alienation in society, and the point is that precisely this overlapping impasse allows me to communicate – though, of course, communication never fully succeeds. Social and cultural exchanges are in the end correlative to our attempts to deal with the impossibility of true communication, which is why the fundamental limit of the human condition (the fact that we are split, unable to connect with ourselves) *is also its condition of possibility*.

From this dialectical perspective, the romantic/elitist image of the subject rising above the world qua object of contemplation is as absurd as the fabled image of the Baron of Munchausen escaping a swamp by pulling himself up by his own hair. We can experience our selves only as at least minimally "reified" in society. In truth, then, we are always in the mire, in the fold of the social, unable to find something in us that would pull us out once and for all. As we shall see, however, the crucial twist in this dialectical sequence is that freedom from external constraints *exists*, but it coincides with our over-identification with radical otherness rather than with our illusory distancing from it. Freedom is traumatic because our separation and autonomy from the world can only be achieved through separation from the self (Lacan's "subjective destitution") – through our assumption of the

"unconscious knowledge" that is "in us more than ourselves". Already in the Introduction of his first English book, Žižek reminds us, for instance, that Althusser's "ethics of alienation" can be overcome by Lacan's "ethics of separation" (Žižek 1989: 3). In this respect, the only way out of the swamp for old Baron of Munchausen would be, paradoxically, to push himself in it fully. What we should not forget, however, is that our symbolic relation to the social remains embodied in a surplus of meaning which determines our alienation, and categorically precludes the ideal of a transparent inter-subjective community à la Habermas, or of Marx's dialectical overcoming of alienation. The constitutive feature of our subjectivity is a fundamental antagonism which resists any attempt at symbolic integration.

This is also why Žižek identifies our increasing inability to perceive ourselves as a priori immersed in the social as the trouble with postmodern subjectivity. The postmodern individual, increasingly at the mercy of capitalist ideology, is fundamentally solipsistic and narcissistic: he sees himself as "unglued", detached from the socio-symbolic field, and perceives himself exclusively in terms of self-mastery. Žižek has highlighted how this dominant notion of subjectivity is co-extensive with Michel Foucault's turn towards the conflation of aesthetics and ethics, against the background of his anti-universalism.[2] The point is that today's dominant form of subjectivity perceives its own inadequacy and self-fragmentation in terms of cynicism, i.e. as a good enough reason to withdraw from social interaction, avoiding the risk of encountering others, and to believe only in its own power to (constantly) refashion itself. The result is that, while the other is increasingly branded as a potential encroachment upon our fragile narcissistic balance (the other as "smoker", "stalker", "voyeur", etc.), we tend to withdraw more and more into proto-psychotic solipsism. Blind to the fact that social exchange is not hindered but enabled by the basic alienation of the human condition, the cynical postmodern individual simultaneously fails to recognize this alienation as constitutive of his own self.

The problem is, evidently, a political one, since breaking down the solipsistic wall of postmodern subjectivity should be seen as the first step towards the reconfiguration of a collective political subject. To avoid misunderstandings, however, we should again remind ourselves that such a collective subject beyond individualism would not be uncomplicatedly self-transparent. Instead, it would be deeply informed by its self-alienation, Žižek's wager being that only the endorsement of our radical finitude can lead us not merely to make authentic contact with others, but also, more crucially, to imagine a successful political intervention – one, that is, where Subject is coincidental with Substance. Žižek's "subject" thus re-appropriates the

utopian urge inherent in what Lacan called 'subjective destitution' (Lacan 1995: 8): the traumatic "fall of knowledge", the assumption of the non-existence of the big Other and consequent evacuation of all subjective ideals, references and points of identification.[3]

It is therefore crucial, politically, to conceive self-alienation not as a problem but as the key to the solution. When Žižek claims that '[t]he leftover which resists "subjectivation" embodies the impossibility which "is" the subject: in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition' (Žižek 1989: 209), he means not only that our being split is what guarantees our identity through its (the split's) disavowal, but also that this explosive antagonism is simultaneously what makes us subjects, and as such capable of engaging in a real (political) confrontation with what is around us. We truly become worthy of the notion "subject" when we over-identify with the object that causes our division. If the first step is the acknowledgement of the disavowed internal antagonism that divides us, the next one is its full assumption.[4] It is the same as with the difference between sexuality and love: sexuality implies my alienation and consequent recourse to fantasy; love, on the other hand, emerges from the collapse of the fantasy and my "miraculous" identification with the inconsistency of the other. As we shall see below, this is decisive to map out Žižek's attempt to politicize subjectivity as well as the process of subjectivation, which signals our successful entrance in the socio-symbolic network through the swipe of (symbolic) castration.

With the way Žižek reads Lacan, it is not enough to claim that the subject is split, mutilated, dispersed, unable to find itself due to its division. This is perhaps satisfactory for the relativistic ontology of deconstruction and postmodern thought in general. The key point about the Lacanian subject, however, is that it stages the same type of reflexivity staged by the Hegelian subject, for it can be defined as the place where the otherness that prevents us from achieving full identity coincides with the very inconsistency/non-existence of the big Other.[5] This inconsistency is of course embodied by that special object named *objet a*. Paraphrasing Flaubert's bon mot on Madame Bovary, one could say that 'objet a c'est moi!', since I, the subject, am the alien "thing" whose disturbing elusiveness I happily, if unconsciously, displace onto the other. To use Lacan's well-known formula, *objet a* is "in me more than myself". This is why, for example, in scopic (visual) desire the subject finds itself in the traumatic encounter with the impossible gaze, namely in the stain, the constitutive distortion, that simultaneously characterizes external reality. Such a view calls for the awareness that 'I myself am included in the picture constituted by me' in the form of a blind spot; my material

existence, that is, derives from my being both outside and inside the reality I behold: 'Materialism means that the reality I see is never "whole" – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it' (Žižek 2006b: 17).

To take a familiar filmic example, let us consider the uncanny passage in David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) when Fred, played by Bill Pullman, meets at a party a sinister and mysterious man who claims that the two have met before at Fred's house. When Fred retorts that he has never seen him before, the man tells him that *he is at his house now*, inviting him to check by calling his number. Fred dials his own number and, to his surprise, the mystery man answers his phone. When Fred asks how he got there, the man replies: 'You invited me'. The scene depicts with impeccable precision the idea that the stain or blind spot of *jouissance* (the mystery man) which I stumble upon "out there", in external reality, is nothing but the surplus of *jouissance* that I am, and that I need to disavow if I am to retain a modicum of sanity. It is the same with Michelangelo Antonioni's classic film *Blow-up* (1966): when the photographer, played by David Hemmings, locates the blurred image of the dead man in the photo enlargement, he effectively encounters there the object-cause of his (scopic) desire, the stain which defines his subjectivity. Not surprisingly, in both films the result of this short-circuit, whereby one encounters himself in the external world, is subjective destitution, the collapse of knowledge, a passage through the "zero level" of subjectivity.

When in the *Phenomenology* Hegel claims, after his long refutation of the would-be science of physiognomy, that 'Spirit is a bone' (the skull), he effectively calls into question the parallactic, i.e. split status of consciousness, inasmuch as it culminates in 'the *infinite judgement* that the self is a Thing, a judgement that suspends itself' (Hegel 1977: 209). Thought, in other words, cannot be treated as an independent entity sundered from the inert thing represented by the skull – nor does it merely originate, as claimed by cognitivism, in a series of neurophysiological processes. Rather, it exists *only* in its indivisible correlation with what is radically incompatible with it, namely inert matter. Just like insemination and urination represent a parallax of the same organ (210), thought can only become actual as a parallax, i.e. through its relation with its thing-like, unknowable materiality. For this reason it can only fail, and its failure decrees the failure of dialectics insofar as it is (naively) conceived as a mediating movement that sublates all obstacles and differences. In failing, however, dialectics succeeds, for it is precisely its encounter with the indigestible leftover, or surplus of thought, that allows it to function.

In a similar vein, Lacanian psychoanalysis posits that the subject can only be defined as a decentred object. More to the point, what is externalized and out of reach for Lacan is self-consciousness itself: it is not simply that I can never be fully self-conscious because of the presence in me of an objectal leftover that I cannot subjectivize; much more radically, this decentred kernel of otherness embodies my self-consciousness, the only place where I have a chance to locate the truth about myself. As far as my existential options are concerned, this reasoning points to two mutually exclusive outcomes: I either accept my alienation – the fact that I am the product of the swipe of castration, that my identity is fully mediated by the big Other – or, exercising the only true freedom I have, I stretch towards the other in me (the objectal surplus that I am unable to subjectivize) in an effort to become subject. For Lacan, as well as for Žižek, it is only the second option that should be regarded as ethical, for in it I do not compromise my desire (instead, I turn it into drive).

In light of these considerations, the reason why Žižek (breaking with a tradition of cultural critics that ranges from Heidegger to Fukuyama, Habermas and McKibben) is fascinated by technology and the prospect of biogenetic manipulation appears obvious: through self-objectivization, the (future) posthuman subject is not simply reduced to an object of science deprived of autonomy; rather, experiencing ourselves as radically alienated in the world, aware of our traumatic finitude, may be our best chance to break with our ideological constellation and open up the potential for a new symbolic order, a new understanding of what it means to be human. Žižek embraces biogenetics not only as a case of "it is already too late to stop it", but also, more pointedly, because it confronts us with the 'abyss of our freedom, and, simultaneously, with the radical contingency of the emergence of consciousness' (Žižek 2006b: 198).

## Shades of void

It is worth underlining that the negativity at stake in Žižek's conception of the subject does not lead him to endorse a morbid fascination with void, death or destruction, as many of his critics have suggested. Žižek does not hypostatize negativity. Rather, he accomplishes what in Hegelian terms would be the passage from the "determinate reflection" to the "reflexive determination" of negativity, whereby a given identity emerges as 'an inverted presentation of its opposite' (Žižek 2008c: 87), i.e. as the positive appearance of the negativity that subtends it.[6] This is indeed an important

passage which needs careful consideration. Let us take the previous point that our identity is never self-transparent, "identical with itself". What Žižek's reading of Hegel allows us to grasp is that this impossibility does not merely relate to the fact that identity is bewitched by the power of the negative, always in danger of disappearing into the void. What needs to be added is that this subtending negativity itself is redoubled into a form of appearance whose inert, non-symbolic presence (su)stains identity qua field of meaning. The classic Hegelian example of this determination would be the State as the symbolic field par excellence whose complex consistency, however, is sustained by the "supernumerary", excessive, ultimately irrational character of the monarch intended precisely as the form of appearance of its opposite – an appearance of fullness embodying negativity. In Lacanian terms, this logic can be appreciated through the opposition Symbolic/Real mediated by *objet a*, since *objet a* is the fascinating "thing", the paradoxical enmeshment of appearance and void, which confers consistency upon our field of meaning precisely by being in excess of it, irreducible to interpretation.

We should therefore be careful to avoid the misrepresentation of the Žižekian subject as merely a void that potentially explodes all forms of subjectivity. Although the subject is, ultimately, abstract negativity – the very gap that corresponds to the gap in the Other – Žižek's point would seem to be that the subject qua abstract negativity can only apprehend itself through an "objective correlative" of such negativity – the very "stuff" of which *objet a* is made. The subject thus encounters itself in an excessive materialization of otherness which, although substantial and indeed material, *no mirror would ever be able to reflect*. Another way of putting this is by saying that an individual is paradoxically more present as subject in the traces he leaves about himself than in his full presence, 'as in the well-known experience after somebody's death when it is by going over his remaining everyday personal objects – his writing-table, little objects in his bedroom – that we become aware of who the deceased really was' (Žižek 2008c: 134).

The implications of this view are fairly obvious: we are neither in the presence of the self-transparent Cartesian cogito nor at the mercy of deflagrating negativity; what is at issue, rather, is the prospect of conceiving subjectivity in relation to the failure of subjectivity itself. Žižek's wager is that the affirmation of the cogito, of the Lacanian subject of enunciation (subjectivity mediated by the big Other), hinges on a mechanism of exclusion or disavowal (symbolic castration) which is at the same time the condition of its potential failure. The originality and unique political appeal of Žižek's understanding of the subject lies, it would seem, in two interconnected features. First, we need to stress the speculative identity and inseparability of

subject and substance (Hegel), or the simultaneous emergence of subjectivity and the symbolic order (Lacan) – since, as we have seen, the two emerge through the intersection of their respective gaps.[7] Secondly, and as a direct consequence of the first point, Žižek's politics hinges on the potential failure of the totalizing gesture of disavowal which produces subjectivation and simultaneously knowledge, the order of meaning. From Žižek's Marxist perspective, the key manifestation of the Real upon whose disavowal society is erected, is, of course, class struggle: although its disavowal makes social coexistence possible, it simultaneously makes it impossible since it perpetually haunts our symbolic space, reminding us of its inconsistency and (potentially) demanding ever-new symbolizations.

Here "reflexive determination" can again be put to good use, for the sheer negative magnitude of class struggle, an antagonism which cannot be symbolized, is absorbed and partially gentrified in forms of appearance of its opposite, i.e. objective concretions of its excessive character (ranging from political leaders to commodities). The point being that entire socio-symbolic contexts are "sutured" and kept together, in an illusion of consistency (which has very real effects despite never fully succeeding), by a series of elusive objects whose basic role is homologous to that of the monarch in Hegel's theorization of the State. In brief, for Žižek class struggle is the Real that organizes the Symbolic not so much through its absence/non-existence, but through the transformation of its negative magnitude into forms of appearance of fullness, which in Lacan go under the name of master-signifiers. What does a master-signifier do? It quilts all the floating elements of the signifying chain, retroactively creating the necessary illusion that they were always linked in some kind of meaningful and consistent linearity. Thus, meaning always emerges *ex post facto*, that is to say, after the intervention of a master-signifier that sutures the openness of the symbolic order.

This bears important political consequences, if only because these objective "supernumerary" elements which, as it were, borrow from the negativity of class struggle are and will always be at the heart of any political field, playing different strategic roles with regard to the symbolic order they suture. This is true, for example, of political leaders. If a right-wing populist by definition denies the antagonistic resonance of class struggle, despite the fact that he is nothing but its "reflexive determination" (a concrete embodiment of its opposite), a left-wing revolutionary leader, on the contrary, tends to politicize the disruptive, violent negativity of class struggle of which he is also the positive embodiment. Ultimately, Žižek maintains that all social formations are answers to the same formal deadlock or impossibility,

which however manifests itself through different contents, thus requiring different tactical interventions. If every social formation is sustained by a secret reference to the a-historical kernel called class struggle, this kernel is historically determined and mobilizes radically heteronomous logics.

## Freedom and the act

At this stage of our investigation into political subjectivity, we need to confront the Žižekian claim concerning the coincidence of radical agency (the revolutionary act) and freedom. We had started by considering how the conscious activity of individuals (after subjectivation) is not free, but instead determined by the symbolic network in which they come into being. However, having shown how we are "in excess of ourselves", constantly haunted by the shadow of the subject in us, we concluded that the only free act we are given to accomplish is guaranteed by our over-identification with what is "in us more than ourselves", precisely that very subject which, at the same time, embodies the destabilizing excess of the symbolic structure. It is this excess that justifies Žižek's recurrent use of such terms as "inhuman" and "monstrous", terms through which he intends to oppose the biopolitical reduction of man to a "mere life" to be administered, exploited or even used as a springboard for potential emancipation.[8] Making the most of both the psychoanalytic tradition he follows and Hegelian dialectics, Žižek dehumanizes the subject, reclaiming a role for the monstrous, meaningless, "stupid" truth that inhabits us, so that an opening can be envisioned in the bad infinity of today's depoliticized universe. It is vital to clarify that inhuman does not mean external to humanity, but 'marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as "humanity", is inherent to being-human' (Žižek 2006b: 22). Thus Žižek's writing fully embraces 'the paradox that every normative definition of the "human" is possible only against an impenetrable ground of "inhuman", of something which remains opaque and resists inclusion in any narrative reconstitution of what counts as "human" ' (111).

An act, in this context, is itself always "monstrous", for it involves 'a momentary "suspension of the big Other", of the socio-symbolic network that guarantees the subject's identity' (Žižek 2000a: 263–64). Put differently, the dimension of the act is governed by the death-drive, whose intervention signifies the necessity for the agent to repeatedly experience the symbolic breakdown of its own subjective economy in so far as it is mediated by the big Other. Žižek's "act" draws equally from Hegel and Lacan:

> What is therefore crucial for Hegel's notion of the act is that an act always, by definition, involves a moment of externalization, self-objectivization, of the jump into the unknown. To "pass to the act" means to assume the risk that what I am about to do will be inscribed into a framework whose contours elude my grasp, that it may set in motion an unforeseeable train of events, that it will acquire a meaning different from or even totally opposed to what I intended to accomplish – in short, it means to assume one's role in the game of the "cunning of reason". (And what is at stake in la passe, the concluding moment of the psychoanalytical process, is precisely the analysand's readiness to fully assume this radical self-externalization, i.e., "subjective destitution": I am only what I am for the others, which is why I have to renounce the fantasy-support of my being, my clinging to "my own private Idaho", to some hidden treasure in me, inaccessible to others). (Žižek 1993: 31)

Radical agency is therefore decidedly on the side of the Real. However, the Real of *jouissance* is also rendered by the late Lacan as *jouis-sens* (or *sens joui*), "enjoy-meant", which suggests that it is qualified by its uncanny ambiguity at the level of symbolic meaning. Although it is radically other and therefore traumatic, it emerges from and is glued to symbolization, i.e. thought. The Lacanian parallax between the Symbolic and the Real can therefore be read alongside the Hegelian motto 'Spirit is a bone'. As parallax, it embodies the measure of our failure to fully symbolize the world but also the necessity for us to symbolize it: 'Must I repeat that it is only in relation to a discourse that such a subject [the subject of the unconscious] can be truly located, namely in relation to something whose artificiality concretizes it' (Lacan 1990: 37). One crucial implication here is the Žižekian thesis according to which the act of freedom against a repressive ideological predicament does not comport the shunning of ideology but rather full identification with the antagonistic core of ideology itself. To redress a common misreading of Žižek, then, it should be noted that the act does not affirm the irrationalist 'mysticism of a sublime Subject', nor 'a Lacanian existential heroism' (Resch 2001: 6 and 18). Instead, it is aimed at re-inscribing a politically viable understanding of antagonism within today's increasingly saturated and impenetrable ideological constellation.[9]

Let us recall that the process of subjectivation is our answer to the uncanny otherness we experience in external reality. Our identities are constituted through the circulation of desire accompanied by its inseparable correlative, fantasy. How exactly? As anticipated, what sets our desire in motion, thus producing those historically specific fantasies that help us to constitute

what we perceive as our unique identity, is always our indecision vis-à-vis the other's desire. We form our selves against the background of a troublesome question that threatens to undermine our relationship with external reality, inclusive of all its "others". This question is Lacan's famous *Che vuoi?* ("what do you want?"), which tells us that what is at stake in desire is not *our* fantasy ("what do I want?"), but *the other's* fantasy ("what does he/she want from me?"). As in the case of Freud's little daughter Anna's dreaming about strawberries,[10] we can claim that our activity is a direct emanation of our desires only if we acknowledge that our desires are conceived as an answer to the bothering gaze of the other, a gaze invested by *jouissance*. Ultimately, we desire to secure our own place in the symbolic order through the other's recognition. In Žižek's interpretation of Freud's daughter's dream, 'the crucial feature is that while she was voraciously eating a strawberry cake, the little girl noticed how her parents were deeply satisfied by this spectacle, by seeing her fully enjoying it' (Žižek 1997: 9). Despite Žižek's slight distortions of Freud's text (the strawberries become a strawberry *cake* – which might work as a Freudian slip in its own right – and the added part on Anna's parents looking at her while she was eating) his Lacanian point about the reflexivity of desires remains extremely insightful. Ultimately, if our identity emerges as an intrinsically desperate strategy to answer the other's desire, this means that by stripping our desire of its protective function we get precisely what we seek to avoid: the radical inconsistency that marks the status of subjectivity proper.

Here we should go back to the crucial question of free will, which Žižek understands in connection with the German idealist account of the term. Against the philosophical cliché that there is no place for the individual's free will in German idealism, Žižek argues that the idea of subjectivity there proposed does endorse access to freedom of will – provided, however, that we conceive of this freedom not in liberal humanist terms, but as a destabilizing encounter with the abyssal contingency of external reality. Žižek's point is that free will hinges on the paradox of the frightful disconnection from causality brought about by drive, i.e. an encounter with our radical finitude, which ultimately coincides with the radical contingency of reality itself. In short, necessity covers both the actual causal link (the inevitability of what happens to us) and its virtual background of multiple un-actualized possibilities and directions. And freedom is consubstantial with necessity insofar as it sabotages causality by endorsing it fully – inclusive, that is, of its un-actualized background. By so doing, freedom triggers the retroactive choice of a different causal link, i.e. 'it changes the future by changing the past' (Žižek 2006b: 203).

Thus conceived, subjective freedom implies a form of self-determination which begins with the thwarting intervention of drive followed by the redefinition of my causality: it corresponds to 'my ability to choose/determine which causes will determine me. "Ethics", at its most elementary, stands for the courage to accept this responsibility' (Žižek 2006b: 203). This "positing the presuppositions" (Hegel) is the minimal but crucial power of the subject, through which we can retroactively assume a new causal link. Put differently, the causal link in which we are embedded creates an effect it cannot contain and threatens to subvert the cause itself. This is why freedom, for Žižek, has the form of a loop: we have a chance to disconnect and opt for a different cause, i.e. choose a process of subjectivation with a different content. The whole point is that while I cannot choose directly what I will be in the future (as that would entail bypassing the process of subjectivation through the other), I can nevertheless embrace change by transforming my past, identifying with one of my past history's un-actualized causal chains. The key move towards liberation thus begins with perceiving my cause as virtual. From a political angle, the Žižekian "defence of lost causes" (such as communism) is precisely the attempt to actualize an opportunity that was missed at a given historical conjuncture – and that, if actualized, could change the future.[11] This is why Žižek endorses Hegel's claim that infinity is not to be conceived as endless expansion but 'active self-limitation (self-determination)' (Žižek 2006b: 205). Why? Once again, because nothing escapes necessity, including its own excess:

> The question of freedom is, at its most radical, the question of how this closed circle of fate can be broken. The answer, of course, is that it can be broken not because "it is not truly closed", because there are cracks in the texture, but, on the contrary, because it is overclosed, that is, because the subject's very endeavor to break out of it is included in advance. That is to say: since our attempts to assert our freedom and escape fate are themselves instruments of fate, the only real way to escape fate is to renounce these attempts, to accept fate as inexorable. [. . .] accept fate as inevitable, and you will break its grasp on you. (207)

What this means is not that we should simply accept the current state of things as fate, as something we cannot change,[12] but rather that we should change it by recognizing its nullity, the fact that, precisely as necessity, its foundations are void. If we agree with this understanding of freedom as over-identification with the causal chain *inclusive of its un-actualized causes*, perhaps the key political questions, simple as they may sound, can be put along these

lines: what is it that brings about the dimension of drive? How can drive be connected to a specific political project that actualizes our lost causes?

## Synchronizing the struggle

The starting point must be that every authentic political decision, for Žižek, is ultimately marked by its radical contingency, its abyssal trans-strategic value – which not only guarantees that we are acting freely, but also makes it impossible for us to establish a priori what will happen after the act. However, we could still legitimately argue that a politics of the Real, that is to say a politics founded upon (as opposed to "bewitched by") the axiom of the irreducible amalgamation of Symbolic and Real, needs to find ways of strategically conceiving a given project as "driven", i.e. as an intervention in the Real, rather than activate itself after the (f)act. More precisely, we should claim that drive itself – the intrusion of traumatic negativity opening up the potential for change – can take place as the (unexpected, excessive, pervasively unconscious) result of our concrete political engagement with a lost cause, no matter how such engagement is pre-empted by its ideological context. What if the problem that lies ahead concerns the necessity to become aware of how the gap between our inevitably limited strategy towards "promoting change" and change itself is already immanent to our strategy? The wager here is that the conscious definition of, and engagement with, an authentically subversive political strategy already necessarily includes drive and the dimension of the act, for although the act brought about by drive is by definition incommensurable, it can be conceived as synchronous with the attempt to disturb the core of the hegemonic ideological constellation. If the act emerges *ex nihilo*, its incommensurability and unpredictability must nevertheless be conceived as an integral part of the strategy that targets the inconsistency of the ideological edifice – which means that the real question has to do with the strategic definition of the feasibility of an intervention that successfully politicizes class struggle.[13] As it will become apparent further on, what I am suggesting here is that the disruptive dimension of the act be conceived not only as the explosion of unstoppable revolutionary urge at the level of ontic reality, but also as the vital component of that surplus of thought which typifies the psychoanalytic approach.

Evidence for the synchronicity of a strategy based on class struggle and drive is provided by the very definition of subjectivity given by Žižek. The paradox of subjectivity, as we have seen, is that it does not coincide with consciousness, for the simple reason that consciousness does not coincide

with itself. The entire edifice of Žižek's politics hinges on the definition of consciousness as traversed, distorted, disfigured by its own self-generated excess, which is precisely the locus of the subject (self-consciousness). The moment we speak of/through consciousness, the latter has already been divided by the "other speech" of the unconscious, or deformed by our Real enjoyment. Because of its connatural abnormity, every political decision, as well as every communicative act, cannot be *fully* contained or described in a rational context. By the same token, because ideology is incapable of fully controlling itself, it fails to fully control what falls in its way.

As anticipated, this position should not be read as a glorification of irrationalism, or an attempt at creating a transcendental teleology centred on an elusive "outside". The point, rather, is to draw political thought to confront the evidence that the outside/otherness mobilized by the act is always-already "included out", and that precisely by occupying an uncharted location *in thought* it can drive us. Since radical dislocation is constitutive of subjectivity and thus of thought and knowledge, every authentic political intervention needs to elaborate a theoretical procedure that accounts for and intervenes in this dislocation, in the awareness that every such intervention is aimed at changing the symbolic configuration of our social experience. Ultimately, the strategic, conscious moment of the struggle for hegemony, insofar as it constitutes itself as a form of class struggle, is by definition an attempt to disturb the "unknown knowledge" ensconced in the unconscious. What should not be neglected, then, is the attempt to theorize a strategic intervention in our social constellation that lives up to the sublimity of the act. Although the former will always be hampered by its original debt to the dominant ideological order, by which it is necessarily mediated,[14] it will also inherit from that order its excess, or inconsistency, which it needs to exploit.

If there is a limit to Žižek's theorization of subjectivity in its relation to politics it is that it stops all too readily at the assertion of the necessity of drive, often neglecting drive's consubstantial strategic moment. Though Žižek knows well that the revolutionary act, inclusive of its violent dimension, cannot succeed without a rational evaluation of the context and a theory that prepares its "groundless ground" – no matter how disfigured by the post-revolutionary conditions – his politics runs the risk of privileging an abstract Real at the expenses of the Symbolic from which this Real emerges. Let us take the following emblematic quotation:

> The point is not simply that, once we are thoroughly engaged in a political project, we are ready to put everything at stake for it, including our

> lives; but, more precisely, that only such an "impossible" gesture of pure expenditure can change the very co-ordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation. This is the key point: an act is neither a strategic intervention in the existing order, nor its "crazy" destructive negation; an act is an "excessive", trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order. (Žižek 2004b: 81)

This passage captures both the strength and the weakness of Žižek's politics. While one should wholeheartedly retain the vital emphasis on the necessity of a gesture that can only appear as "impossible" from within the coordinates in which it is conceived, on the other hand I would reformulate the second part of the quotation, stressing that "an act is both a strategic intervention in the existing order and the excessive intervention that redefines the rules of the game". The whole point, however, is that *this gesture should be applied to theory itself*. The emphasis should be placed on the consubstantiality of the symbolic intervention aimed at a specific political agenda (defined by the awareness of class struggle) and the Real of an act incorporated in that specific theoretical intervention. It is probably this endeavour to determine the convergence of thought and the act that has brought Žižek to theorize a move beyond democracy.

Chapter 8

# Democracy under duress

What do people know? As Hegel argues throughout the *Philosophy of Right*, they know things "in themselves" – immanently, implicitly; it is their representatives who must formulate their interests and goals for them, turning their knowledge "for-themselves". Only that way can the particular and the universal reveal their identity. One of Žižek's most controversial claims concerns the relation between political change and authority. In a world that is fast becoming worldless – in the atonal reign of liquid modernity – he maintains that perhaps 'the task of the analyst should no longer be to undermine the hold of Master-Signifiers, but, on the contrary, to construct/propose/install *new* Master-Signifiers' (Žižek 2006b: 307). What lies at the heart of this proposition is the conviction that although the critical dimension is still necessary ("to undermine master-signifiers"), it is less and less sufficient, for the simple reason that the rejection or exposure of *explicit* forms of authority is one of the key conditions upon which capital thrives. What we encounter in this assertion is therefore the blind spot of contemporary (leftist) political thought, which, especially since the historical demise of socialism, has been glaringly at a loss vis-à-vis the task of constructing and proposing new orders of meaning that might not only challenge but also dare to perceive themselves as having enough strength to eventually supplant capitalism. Overcoming this historical impasse, which is first and foremost a theoretical impasse, should be regarded as the key politico-philosophical mission ahead for anyone engaged in the struggle for emancipation. From this perspective, Žižek's theory remains unfulfilled. While it has skilfully brought us to the point where a creative confrontation with this impasse can no longer be delayed, and while it is fully aware of the direction it needs to take, it is nevertheless at risk of remaining suffocated by its own demand for a liberated terrain upon which to articulate itself. If not complemented by an effort of creative daring, the "politics of subtraction" is in danger of turning into (yet another) case of "subtraction from politics".[1] We should reiterate that Žižek's psychoanalytic method has

located for us, and encouraged us to exert pressure upon, the nodal points of the socio-symbolic order we inhabit in a manner that remains unparalleled in the history of critical thought, at the same time disclosing future potentialities for political ideas which lie vastly dormant or repressed in our anaemic times of theoretical self-gratification. The demystification of the signifier "democracy" features as one of Žižek's most intriguing attempts to force us into thinking new socio-political constellations, regardless of how tentative these may be. Let us see where it takes us.

## Democracy demystified

Against today's political apathy, Žižek, following Lacan, calls unequivocally for new quilting points that may be able to cause a shift in the underground domain of our disavowed enjoyment, new economies of *jouissance* ready to assume responsibility for the transformation of the symbolic order. This is precisely the job of the master-signifier qua "make-believe" (see Miller 1990: xxx), namely to fix the excess of a given situation through the fascinating lure it (the master-signifier) embodies – a lure derived precisely from the void it veils. Within the parameters of social change inherited from psychoanalysis, based on the axiom of dislocation, it goes without saying that the utopian dream of full transparency of the social should be firmly rejected. Revolution itself means nothing if it fails to achieve 'a new measure of balance' (Žižek 2006b: 308), establishing a new order sustained by a different libidinal economy. The main theoretical reason behind Žižek's attacks on liberal democracy is to be found in the idea that democracy qua bastion of freedoms is either, as Marx had already stated,[2] an empty shell barely hiding the long tentacles of authoritarian capitalism (see Žižek 2009b); or, in the case of its leftist definition, a floating signifier unable to demonstrate any political foundations in the Acheronta of the Real: it cannot go beyond the service of goods, it can only foster inertia, failing to engender genuine political passion and consequently strengthening capitalist dynamics. At this level Žižek agrees wholeheartedly with Badiou that

> what prevents the radical questioning of capitalism itself is precisely belief in the democratic form of the struggle against capitalism. [. . .] What we should problematize is the self-evident opposite of this "anticapitalism": trust in the democratic substance of honest Americans to break up the conspiracy. This is the hard kernel of today's global capitalist universe, its true Master-Signifier: democracy. (Žižek 2006b: 320)

In term of leftist politics, "democratic passion" is an oxymoron whose displaced truth re-emerges in the capitalist drive, i.e. in the domain of the economy, with its all-round co-optation of enjoyment. In fact, the first thing to note apropos the pluralistic, free, open, nomadic, tolerant discourse promoted by today's dominant leftist discourse is that it relies on an osmotic link with capitalist enjoyment: the eviction of *jouissance* from politics (democracy) is sustained by the injunction to enjoy that propels capitalist ideology. As already suggested, injecting democracy with passion is a pious illusion, since the insubstantial humus of democracy over-determines every attempt to galvanize it. In democracy as such, there is nothing to be passionate about, no political place to anchor our *jouissance*. Or rather: either we get passionate about right-wing populism, or we do not get passionate at all. The problem here is that the neutral ground of democracy will always be haunted by right-wing passion – which is why Žižek maintains that one should problematize the notion of democracy itself: to get rid of right-wing passion one needs, as it were, to throw away the baby with the bathwater, i.e. move away from the idea that democracy is the only political horizon for the left.

By itself democracy cannot produce any real paradigm shift. In the same way that there is no such thing as self-analysis, since analytic change can only occur through the transferential relationship with the external figure of the analyst, a master-signifier is necessary to trigger enthusiasm for a new cause, to bring about radical change in the subjective position of his followers, to "transubstantiate" their identity (see Žižek 2008a: 378). We should not forget that this insistence on subjective change within revolutionary power is also a key Marxian theme, as confirmed by the third thesis on Feuerbach, where revolutionary practice is explicitly linked to 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing' (Marx 1998: 570). In *The German Ideology* the concept is repeated almost verbatim: 'In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances' (230). The limit of the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism in general, Žižek argues, is that, in response to the historical failures of socioeconomic Marxist revolutions, they shifted the struggle on to culture, trying to undermine anything involving the "authoritarian personality" (national pride, family, religion, etc.) while often glorifying promiscuity and Bohemianism. In the 1950s and 1960s the Frankfurt School abandoned dialectics and the Marxist notion of the historical necessity of the revolution (the New emerging from the contradictions of the present through its immanent self-overcoming) arising from the Hegelian concept of determinate negation. In its place, they plumped for the utopian overcoming of the global administered order, which would come from a fleeting, unmediated

and unreachable *otherness*, more often than not sublimated into an aesthetic category.[3] Žižek stands squarely opposed to such a view: *this* utopia, for him, is equivalent to accepting the triumph of the global capitalist order.

To understand the function of democracy today we need to consider how the evacuation of political passion it produces 'leaves as the only agency of ideological interpellation the "unnamable" abyss of *jouissance*: the ultimate injunction that regulates our lives in "postmodernity" is "Enjoy!" – realize your potential, enjoy in all manner of ways, from intense sexual pleasures through social success to spiritual self-fulfilment' (Žižek 2008a: 30). The question to ponder concerns the close relation between democracy and enjoyment insofar as, fused into one, they act as a seemingly invincible master-signifier. If enjoyment deep down works as a command, a tremendously efficient source of authority (precisely through the bracketing of its authoritarian dimension), the same can be said about democracy: in Badiou's words, since the collapse of socialism it is 'forbidden, as it were, not to be a democrat' (Badiou 2005b: 78). Democracy as the dominant organizer of consensus is the perfect partner of the capitalist (post-)ideological injunction to enjoy: if the latter "sells itself" as the ultimate proof that we are autonomous subjects free from ideological constraints, democracy is its ideal political counterpart.[4]

The symptomatic inconsistencies of the capitalist master-signifier called enjoyment are easy to spot. The most obvious is perhaps its increasing dependence on the category of the *obscene*. There is another psychoanalytic lesson to learn here: what is becoming more and more manifest today is that our official ambition to enjoy ourselves in a democratic and liberal context *can only realize itself* if supplemented by unmediated outbursts of obscene libidinal attachment, whose status could be seen as ambiguous in terms of capital's ability to negotiate and neutralize its disruptive potential.[5] Žižek's call for new master-signifiers derives its theoretical legitimacy from the awareness that the resilient alliance between capitalism and liberal democracy is even more pointedly reflected in their shared obscene excesses. In this regard, we are faced with the problem that the potentially self-destructive symptoms of our socio-symbolic framework are, as it were, cured by those who produce them: in the economy, vulgarity and obscenity constitute sources of profit; in politics, democracy increasingly includes excesses such as right-wing populism, xenophobia, debates on the legitimization of torture, and wars masked as humanitarian interventions. It is clear that any future paradigm shift will have to find a way to break this vicious circle by either turning this inherently unruly excess *against* the system, and/or inject it with a substantially different relational function.

And yet, perhaps the arrogant obscenity with which the injunction to enjoy bombards us from all sides is already symptomatic of another shift, one concerning the very status of democracy, inasmuch as it tells us that global capitalism is less and less concerned with showing even a formal respect for the rules of the game. The shamelessness with which democratically elected leaders such as Berlusconi and Putin openly attack the institutions is a sign that the interests of capital, which they represent, do not have to coincide anymore with the formal requirements of democracy. Thus democracy, like freedom, becomes a purely nominal, pre-emptive, "fetishistic" reference which "abounds in the mouths of our politicians" so as to prevent the articulation of alternative discourses – while everyone knows that it functions by undemocratic means. The global triumph of capitalism culminates in this barefaced political cynicism, whereby words like "democracy" and "freedom" are demagogically brandished to legitimize the implementation of reactionary and authoritarian measures. If so far capitalism has found in parliamentary democracy a natural ally, it seems that from now on, even in the West, it will increasingly *openly* rely on its authoritarian nature – which, we should not forget, has always been at its heart. Žižek's wager here defies the solution suggested by the liberal left, namely that we must strive to re-establish a democratic balance, respect of the institutions and so on; instead, it tells us that faced with the authoritarian turn of capitalism 'we should confront the limitations of parliamentary representative democracy' itself (Žižek 2009b). That is to say: what is emerging with figures like Berlusconi and Putin is that electoral democracy is useless as a means to contrast capitalism, since it is a pawn in capital's hands to be exploited according to its interests.

The general lesson to learn is that we should confront what we love to disavow: the fact that even when democratic legitimacy seems healthy, our votes merely sanction the existence of an order whose framework has already been decided and imposed on us. In Badiou's concise formulation: 'What is lacking in the vote is nothing less than the *real*' (Badiou 2009b: 11). The choice we have in electoral democracy (the choice among different parties) is always the result of another choice that we do not make and happily pretend to know nothing about. Brutally put, liberal democracy only allows us to choose what does not interfere with the sovereign interests of capital. Even the liberal disgust at right-wing xenophobia, in recent years represented politically by Le Pen, Haider, Buchanan and others, is primarily aimed at purging democracy 'of its minimal subversive sting, extinguishing even the faintest memory of anti-capitalism and class struggle'. In an age when the populist right increasingly 'occupies the terrain evacuated by the

Left', and 'seeks to address and to mobilize whatever remains of the mainstream "working class" in our Western societies', the official message of the unacceptability of this right is meant to speak for 'the benevolence of the official system'. What is artfully concealed is the alarming fact that right-wing populism 'is the necessary supplement of the multiculturalist tolerance of global capital. [. . .] It is the price the Left pays for renouncing any radical political project, and accepting market capitalism as "the only game in town" ' (Žižek 2000b: 37–45).[6]

Going back to "free elections", Žižek argues that they 'involve a minimal show of politeness when those in power pretend that they do not really hold the power, and ask us to decide freely if we want to grant it to them' (Žižek 2009b). For this reason, in our times the only true hope for change would emerge with a so-called crisis of democracy, i.e. in the hypothetical situation when the people stop playing the electoral game of formal investiture and refuse to register a decision which they (already) see as pointless. Only in that refusal to decide would they make a real decision which would threaten to undermine the status quo, for in such instances those in power are unable to verify "what the people want". Commenting on Josè Saramago's novel *Seeing* (2007), which he calls 'a mental experiment in Bartlebian politics' (Žižek 2008b: 180), Žižek claims: 'Why is the government thrown into such a panic by the voters' abstention? It is compelled to confront the fact that it exists, that it exerts power, only insofar as it is accepted as such by its subjects – accepted even in the mode of rejection. The voters' abstention goes further than the intra-political negation, the vote of no confidence: it rejects the very frame of decision' (182). The logical conclusion to this reasoning is that only in the event of achieving successful subtraction from the compulsion to choose what has already been chosen for us, would we be in need of a new master-signifier. However, how likely to happen is this subtractive event? As we can see, we are back to Žižek's dialectical vision.

## The authoritarian core of democracy

At the heart of the above argument on democracy we encounter the psychoanalytic insight that no matter in which configuration, the law by definition eludes human judgement, or, to say it with Lacan, it enjoys. Whether democratic or explicitly totalitarian, the law remains rooted in its tautology, in the enigma of its form so eloquently narrativized by Franz Kafka. The "letter of the law" owes its power to an unconscious libidinal surplus based simply in its senseless enunciation: 'the law can sustain its authority only if

the subjects hear in it the echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion' (Žižek 2006b: 337). We should therefore again remind ourselves that in democracy authority is *always* at work, sustaining the social space where we (more or less) freely interact and express our fantasies, thoughts as well as our freedom to vote. Far from being innocent and self-transparent, democracy is supported by the secret injunction to obey, which is inerasable from any social link.[7] When discussing the limits of democracy, Žižek argues that democratic power by necessity relies on some form of undemocratic excess. In fact, if democracy was truly direct and fully transparent, the expression of the General Will, it simply would not work, for it would paralyse decision-making. We only have to think of the classic example of "excessively democratic" parliamentary democracies, where too many parties and coalition permutations inevitably bring governments to a standstill. To function, democracy needs hierarchies, institutions, relations of power, and these relations are by definition at least minimally undemocratic.

To develop this perspective, Žižek suggests that it is a mistake to oppose liberal democracy and fundamentalism: 'the true Other of liberal democracy is not its fundamentalist enemy, but *its own disavowed underside, its own obscene supplement*' (Žižek 2006b: 365). The binary logic that opposes market-democracy-freedom and fundamentalism-totalitarianism-terrorism is profoundly misplaced, for it obfuscates the true line of division, which is by definition reflexive, coincidental with the antagonism between the official text and its foreclosed underside. Today, democracy and fundamentalism are part of the same logic, which is why opposing them to each other amounts to excluding the true emancipatory alternative.[8] In short, the wager is that the political choice with which the new millennium interpellates us (democracy or fundamentalism) is a false choice, akin to a blackmail aimed at protecting the smooth functioning of capital, increasingly perceived as fate. The bottom line is that enjoyment cannot be evicted from the political: aseptic democracy is inevitably supplemented by violent returns in the Real (racism, fundamentalism, etc): 'the democratic empty place and the discourse of totalitarian fullness are strictly correlative, two sides of the same coin: it is meaningless to advocate a "radical" democracy which would avoid this unpleasant supplement' (Žižek 2008a: 101). Perhaps we should problematize this picture by recalling Badiou's notion of "passion for the Real" (see Badiou 2007a: 48–57), which describes the violent ideological attachments of the last century as they were aimed at bringing about the identity of a *real* beyond spurious fictional representations. With this in mind the question would be: can capitalism mobilize enough ersatz-enjoyment to neutralize and postpone explosions of new fundamentalist passions

for the real, or at least continue to create channels for them to deflagrate outside or in the remotest provinces of Empire?

The *fil rouge* connecting democracy, right-wing populism (or fundamentalism) and capital is particularly evident in relation to what we often lament as the breaking down of symbolic efficiency: social atomization, loss of collective values and so on. This lament is the result of a patent short-sightedness, for what we fail to detect is *the unifying principle governing the fragmentation of social life* – or, to put it with Lacan, the fact that in the midst of all this "mess" the big Other continues to thrive, it remains fully operative. Our complaint is blind to a precise strategy which is being woven in the background, where there is an *invisible value* (exchange value) against which all other values disintegrate. The apparent deterioration of society is sustained by the capitalist matrix, which is increasingly reified and naturalized, to the extent that we are unable to perceive its structuring role. More to the point: to maximize its potential in our current constellation capital needs precisely such an atomized, immaterial universe bereft of ideologies or political projects able to generate passion.

Politically speaking, what remains unquestioned is the paradoxical fact that the perceived collapse of our social *mores* is sustained by the concealed symbolic efficiency of global market economy, in which are all immersed. When we complain about the growing psychotic violence in our societies or the loss of basic norms and habits, we fail to notice that this sweeping sense of anxiety and social insecurity is part and parcel of our participation in the capitalist venture. Ultimately, the great provider of socio-symbolic connectivity is capital, Adam Smith's old but always actual "invisible hand of the market". Collectiveness, which up to a few decades ago could still be perceived as a political signifier, today is shamelessly marketed as the enjoyment of communication, where what matters is *only* the narcissism of "being connected", irrespective of analyses of the actual reasons *why* we should connect.[9] In this context of "practical fetishism" (we do not know what we do, i.e. we fail to see how our daily actions feed the invisible symbolic order against which we lament the loss of values), our deadlock is secured by the fact that the two available political options are always-already included in the predicament they purport to address: we either call for more democracy, or opt for the conservative/reactive alternative, in both cases failing to take into account the unifying principle that keeps us in the loop despite our fears of falling out. Our position is akin to that of Scottie (James Stewart) in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958): blinded by our "practical stakes" (commodities for us, Madeleine/Judy for Scottie), we grow oblivious of our role in setting up the very fiction that threatens to swallow us.[10] Ultimately, the

ruse of capitalist ideology relies on the same blindness: it banks on *our blindness* towards our direct participation in (and enjoyment of) the "game" that generates our social malaise. Insofar as at a certain level we enjoy, we are the cause of ourselves qua social animals. Along similar lines, our political answers are rendered ineffectual by our inability to see that the objective conditions they seek to remedy are nothing but the result of our blind subjective conduct in relentlessly feeding the capitalist matrix.

The implication is that while relying on the fragmentation of symbolic efficiency, the big Other of capital has already taken care of the political "solutions" we are sold. That is to say: when we call for more democracy against whoever or whatever is seen as threatening our "public freedoms", we have already (unconsciously) decided not to go beyond a certain limit – put differently, we have decided to perpetuate the conditions against which we protest. It is against this deadlock – essentially, our inability to perceive the continuity between what we do as "practical fetishists" and the objective conditions we inhabit – that Žižek's proposal to go beyond democracy should be measured. In brief, if democracy still works as a master-signifier, it is because (as all master-signifiers) it prevents us from becoming aware of the extent to which we are enjoying the rules of the game. Ultimately, in fact, the signifier democracy itself becomes the object of our fetishistic enjoyment. It is increasingly deprived of any residual political valence and marketed as just any another commodity.

Why should we continue to fetishize electoral democracy, when we know full well that it presents us with a false choice? Why should we believe in the democratic substance of political orientations that are artfully masterminded by capital and its servants? Indeed, why play along with a game where the disorientation inflicted upon us by the dominant regime is merely packaged and sold back to us as its opposite, namely as our unique chance to make a difference through the voting system? As is well known, Silvio Berlusconi (to name the most obvious case) tends to justify his position not in terms of the content of his political deliberations, but precisely by calling upon the sacred nature of democracy: he has the full support of the "popular will" and consequently should not be criticized. Here it is not enough to ask the obvious question on everybody's lips, i.e. "how can Italians vote for such a populist swindler?" Rather, we should dig deeper and, to use Badiou retort apropos Sarkozy's election, ask more pointedly: "Why should we bow down before the stupidity of numbers"?:

> I must tell you that I absolutely do not respect universal suffrage in itself; it depends on what it does. Is universal suffrage the only thing we should

> respect, regardless of what it produces? And why is that? In no other field of action and judgement on actions do we consider something to be valid independently of its actual effects. Universal suffrage has produced a number of abominations. In history, competent majorities have legitimated Hitler and Pétain, the Algerian war, the invasion of Iraq . . . There is nothing innocent, therefore, about "democratic majorities". To praise numbers because people came out to vote, independently of the result, and to respect this majority decision in a proclaimed indifference to its content, is another symptom of the general depression. (Badiou 2009b: 32)

Marcuse had already stated in unambiguous terms that under capitalist conditions 'the general will is always wrong'. And again: 'The mass democracy developed by monopoly capitalism has shaped the rights and liberties which it grants in its own image and interest; the majority of the people is the majority of their masters' (Marcuse 1972: 68–9). Ultimately, if we fall for the democratic charade, even in times when containing its authoritarian nature ceases to be a priority for those in power, it is because we prefer to stick to a fetish than to confront the openness of the situation. For this reason, we need *new* master-signifiers.

## Apocalypse redux

So we are back to Žižek's political wager, which disturbs the dividing line between what is deemed possible and impossible in today's politics. The awareness of the persistence of the big Other of capital, held together by the *einziger zug* (unary trait) of enjoyment (inclusive of the enjoyment of democracy), leads him to theorize the necessity of the intervention of a "small other" against the growing crisis of liberal democracy: 'a person who is not simply "like the others", but who directly embodies authority' (Žižek 2008a: 35). Of course, in our postmodern universe people directly embodying authority constitute the perfect target for our wit: we perceive them as fallible, inadequate, ridiculous. We regard irony, even better self-irony, as our greatest wisdom, a sign of our enlightenment, of our being in tune with the times. What we tend to disregard, however, is that such an attitude epitomizes the role of our fetishistic disavowal: we laugh at Berlusconi, and yet we unwittingly go along with what he imposes on us; we do not take the system seriously, and yet we obey the dictates of capital. In other words, we blissfully forget that our stance towards authority, which makes us believe that the more we reject it or ridicule it the freer we are, is, historically

speaking, not free – it is not the result of our struggle for the right to exercise freedom; it is rather prescribed by the nameless authority of capital, and reinforces capital's hold over us. The bottom line, in this respect, remains the Marxist one: we should never forget not only that every *economic* question is fundamentally a question of political economy, but also that the same is true of every *political* question.

What are, then, the actual implications of Žižek's exhortation to construct, propose or install new master-signifiers, new acts of nomination capable of restructuring the social field by embodying the very excess of the field? One of the most vituperated passages in all of Žižek's writings can be found at the end of his at times vitriolic dialogue with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Žižek's analysis begins with the argument that despite its past successes in delivering high standards of living to vast portions of the population, capitalism is now approaching a series of contradictions that will lead to its demise. The most prominent of these contradictions is the exclusion and ghettoization of millions of people, whose inert "surplus status" testifies to the failure of what Bill Gates called "frictionless capitalism", the intended establishment of global capitalism as the ultimate world system. This utopian dream of the global market, Žižek surmises, 'is turning into a nightmare in which the fate of millions is decided in hyper-reflexive speculation on futures' (in Butler *et al.* 2000: 322). The consequence of this state of affairs is that society is increasingly split into three macro-categories: the symbolic class (managers, politicians, academics, journalists, lawyers, etc.), the excluded (the unemployed, homeless, underprivileged, etc.) and the long-established middle class whose identity rests on the identification with traditional capitalist modes of production as well as conflict with elements of both the symbolic class (multinationals guilty of excessive financial speculation, academics guilty of excessive intellectual speculation, etc.) and the excluded (foreign immigrants, displaced homeless people, etc.). Žižek's Lacanian insight apropos this division and the shifting alliances of the three classes typifies his intellectual audacity: 'Are we not dealing again with the Lacanian triad Symbolic, Imaginary and Real? Are the excluded not "real" in the sense of the kernel which resists social integration, and is the "middle class" not "imaginary", clinging to the fantasy of society as a harmonious Whole corrupted through moral decay?' (323). If today the role of the symbolic class is to contain the growing conflict between included and excluded through the affirmation of democracy, tolerance and a multiculturalist ethos, Žižek predicts a future moment when the above antagonism will become unsustainable, forcing the symbolic class to theorize and look for a

different, more radical solution. These dynamics, he contends, already show how globalization effectively undermines its own roots. Against Laclau, whose conception of democracy as an empty signifier he sees as failing to disturb the predominant liberal democratic imaginary (325), Žižek argues in his key political allegation that the left should flatly reject '*today's liberal blackmail that courting any prospect of radical change paves the way for totalitarianism*' (326), and therefore withdraw from a battle for hegemony *within* the liberal democratic paradigm. Drawing on his favourite reference to Hegel's notion of "reflexive determination", Žižek predicts that today's fragmentation of the social and postmodern proliferation of multiple shifting identities 'awaits its resolution in a new form of Terror'. His understanding and use of the word "terror" is not to be misunderstood for a generic term relating to a non-specified apocalyptic scenario. It does not stand for a pseudo-Lacanian endorsement of destructive *jouissance* and withdrawal into the primordial abyss of the Real. Rather, as one can evince from the final passage below, it qualifies 'the ruthless exercise of power' on behalf of the excluded:

> The only "realistic" prospect is to ground a new political universality by opting for the *impossible*, fully assuming the place of the exception, with no taboos, no a priori norms ("human rights", "democracy"), respect for which would prevent us from "resignifying" terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice . . . if this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as *Linksfaschismus*, so be it! (326)

Žižek's rhetorical use of the term *Linksfaschismus*, provocative as it may be, aims at two precise symptomal points of our current ideological framework. First, the rejection of the 'liberal blackmail' according to which any challenge to the liberal democratic consensus is motivated by fascistic or Stalinist tendencies which will inevitably resolve themselves in yet another form of totalitarianism. Here Žižek endorses Badiou's insight that democracy, rather than Empire or Capital, should be regarded as the main enemy of emancipatory politics, since the struggle against capitalism is fundamentally impeded by the conviction that it has to take place through the channels of democracy. Secondly, Žižek's Leninist leitmotif of the impelling necessity to politicize, i.e. to organize and discipline, the excluded masses of "human waste" forming the increasingly unmanageable by-product of the capitalist drive. The polemical verve involved in such a stance is perfectly captured in this passage towards the end of *In Defence of Lost Causes*:

> The standard liberal counter-argument to those who warn about the "invisible hand" of the market that controls our destinies is: if the price of being freed from the *invisible* hand of the market is to be controlled by the *visible* hand of new rulers, are we still ready to pay it? The answer should be: *yes* – if this visible hand is visible to and controlled by the "part of no-part". (Žižek 2008a: 419)

But besides the formidable boldness with which these words defy the liberal blackmail and revive the old and forgotten theme of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", what immediately strikes the eye here is the absence of a third term, which would at least help us to begin to imagine *how, according to which political and economic principles*, the destructured masses (that we ourselves are silently becoming) should organize. The absence of this third term is often highlighted as a fundamental weakness of Žižek's politics, a flaw that makes it unworkable. Ian Parker, for instance, claims that 'political action is resolutely confined by Žižek to the individual, and the collective project of class consciousness and revolutionary change envisaged by Marxism is outside the frame of his political analysis' (Parker 2004: 97).[11] Before assessing what is undoubtedly a key question in Žižek's theoretical edifice, let us remind ourselves that in his critique of liberal democracy the excess which democracy is so keen to disavow is inerasable. The gist of Žižek's analysis is that, rather than insisting on denying its evidence, we should dare to put it to good use, fighting for the best social content that can be "anchored" to it. *Terror always accompanies the fight for the excluded*: it is primarily perceived as terror by those who are included. The true choice for Žižek is between fear and terror: the politics of fear we are subjected to (ecological catastrophe, immigrant invasions, etc.) can only be resolved through terror. There is no going back to safety, we have to accept the fact that we have nothing to lose: 'from the fear of losing our anchorage in the big Other, we should pass to the terror of there being *no* big Other' (DLC 434). But what is the actual logic governing this type of struggle?

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Chapter 9

# Dialectical materialism as parallax

We can surmise that the above logic is made up of two distinct phases, which are describable in standard dialectical terms: its *pars destruens* and its *pars construens*, where the former entails a specific effort of subtraction, of "wiping the slate clean", and the latter the Hegelian "negation of negation", a creative effort of symbolic restructuring. To put it in Lacanian terms, we have the "traversal of the fantasy" (Lacan 1981: 273), modelled on Freud's concept of "working-through" (see Nobus and Quinn 2005: 206–07), followed by sublimation as the operation which, at least partially and temporarily, allows us to weave the fantasy again, thus providing a minimum of being to the lack brought about by the traversal of the fantasy and constitutive of the self.[1] In epistemological terms, the first subversive intervention (the endorsement of the drive "in us more than ourselves") entails an *evacuation of knowledge*, and has to be followed by the difficult work concerning the transformation of this *tabula rasa* into a new order, albeit in the awareness that the complex sublimating process will never quite manage to eliminate surplus qua bearer of negativity. Lacan's point is that, despite being only surrogates of the Real or embodiments of negativity, the elusive objects of sublimation (*objets a*) function as obstacles which open up a new dimension, allowing the fantasy to be rewoven, and at the same time eliciting a narcissistic relaxation complicit with the reprise of the function of desire. Lacan places considerable emphasis on the fact that although sublimation involves 'a certain satisfaction of the drive', in truth the peculiarity of the drive is that it 'is able to find its aim elsewhere than in that which is its aim' (Lacan 1992: 110). As Žižek has pointed out, the real libidinal aim of the drive is to *miss* the imaginary object of desire. More precisely, while in desire we become aware that the object, insofar as it enjoys, is unreachable, in drive we realize that *we* are the locus of an excessive, unshakeable and unbearable *jouissance* which threatens to derail the ordinary run of things. This is to say that in Lacan sublimation mediates between drive and desire: it begins to "transfer" the raw negativity of drive into an empirical object that works as a stand-in

for that deflagrating negativity. By doing so, it opens up a space that can be compared to a construction site where the "desire to know" proliferates everywhere, covering the entire field, and yet it remains open to the destructive influence of the drive, which it can turn into at any time.

## 'Freedom is the condition of liberation'

In a political context, to be transformative the moment of sublimation must be thoroughly creative, if only because it changes the revolutionary premises to the extent of reinventing them, with good peace for the revolutionary subject who must be prepared to vanish.[2] The implicit unworkable limit of subtractive negativity must be negated by a second movement to prevent that the whole effort is in vain.[3] First, the dialectical struggle concerns the task of undermining the unconscious libidinal conjuncture constitutive of various symptomal points of the capitalist order. Here we need to recall the key Lacanian thesis apropos surplus-*jouissance*: in its ultimate form, surplus embodies a void, a lack, which therefore needs to be endorsed as such, in its traumatic negativity, if we are to achieve subtraction. The second task, equally crucial, is to invent a new, concrete mode of existence for the same surplus, filling its empty frame with a knowledge that may sustain a fundamentally changed symbolic order.

In subtraction, incidentally, what appears as traumatic to those attached to a given power system, might well appear as 'the imaginary explosion of freedom in sublime enthusiasm' (Žižek 2002: 7) to those engaged in revolutionary activity, as Žižek claims apropos October 1917. The line separating trauma from revolutionary fervour is indeed very thin. According to Marcuse, the term "revolution" refers to both dialectical movements:

> This is the vicious circle: the rupture with the self-propelling conservative continuum of needs must *precede* the revolution which is to usher in a free society, but such rupture itself can be envisaged only in a revolution – a revolution which would be driven by the vital need to be freed from the administered comforts and the destructive productivity of the exploitative society. (Marcuse 1972: 27)

What Marcuse calls "the Great Refusal" (a concept analogous to subtraction) can be described as "the revolutionary condition for the revolution". In other words, freedom (the intrusion of negativity that disconnects us from the false needs the symbolic order projects on us) is the condition for

liberation (the second "creative" stage, when the task is to reinvent our needs).[4] And again, as Marcuse had perspicaciously anticipated, this process is unlikely to take place through democratic means, since their aim is nothing but to reproduce a 'voluntary servitude' (15) to capital, whereby the 'development of a radical political consciousness among the masses' is sacrificed to 'economic demands' voiced from within 'the bourgeois-democratic process' (59). The Great Refusal, then, must extend 'to the entire organization of the existing liberal-parliamentary democracy', since 'to work for the improvement of the existing democracy easily appears as indefinitely delaying attainment of the goal of creating a free society' (67–8).

The whole dialectical sequence, from negativity to the concrete reconfiguration of surplus, enacts a revolutionary intervention that changes the Real. As such, it is clear that the sequence involves a series of unrelated processes and strategic decisions, since the explosion of negativity at stake in subtraction obeys a different logic to the reconfiguration of this negativity into new master-signifiers capable of sustaining a new fiction. Although negativity is consubstantial with the master-signifier, the latter's role is to convert the force of the negative, which always subtends (and destabilizes) the dialectical sequence, into the appearance of its opposite. A master-signifier as a rule performs the gesture of an impostor, for what is concealed behind its ability to "quilt" the string of signifiers is a real lack of authority. However, Lacan's argument, crucial for Žižek's justification of authority and power-taking, is that no social bond would exist without the suturing intervention of the master-signifier. Put differently, what the master-signifier prevents is collective psychosis.

The point of Žižek's defence of Lenin, or more generally of any genuine revolutionary intervention, is strictly consistent with the above two-pronged sequence. The creative endeavour that follows successful subtraction (where successful does not mean conclusive, since if we stop at subtraction no success will ensue) will never bring us a harmonious and self-transparent socio-symbolic order freed from unpalatable excesses; rather, surplus-*jouissance* will persist, for it embodies the substance of human life, a self-alienating addendum which implicitly derails any knowledge. As such, surplus will require constant and meticulous attention. Any future political project aimed at realizing the Marxian task of "improving the free development of each as the condition for the free development of all", needs to think a new strategic connection with the surplus of *jouissance* that dwells in the unconscious. A dialectical materialism informed by psychoanalytic epistemology can only be based on the ontological primacy of the collapse

of knowledge – on the traumatic disconnection from the comfortable background of shared meaning. But precisely because such disconnection is unbearable and unsustainable, the "fall from the fantasy" – or in a more historically accurate way the "bursting of the bubble", with its painfully real consequences – must at some point *overlap with* creative sublimation, which is nothing but the attempt to build a "better fiction", a more just ideological space, by means of the "elevation of an ordinary object to the status of the Thing", as Lacan's famous formula has it (see Lacan 1992: 112).

## Beware of your cynicism!

One of the great merits of Žižek's politics is to assert that *all we have* is a socio-symbolic fiction whose consistency is guaranteed by beliefs. In order to be perceived as reality, the material space in which we live must be structured around ideological beliefs, which for Žižek are all the more effective when they are cynically dismissed, for as a rule belief co-opts us indirectly, without the rubberstamp of our conscious knowledge. In today's ideological constellation, cynical distance is the measure of its opposite: 'even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*' (Žižek 1989: 33). The cynic is therefore the greatest believer, for he can function only if "the system" exists and is publicly recognized – 'that is to say, in order to be a cynic in private, he has to presuppose the existence of naive other(s) who "really believe" ' (Žižek 2008c: lxxii). The overarching implication is that when the mystifying ideological framework loses its grip on us we fall out of reality tout court, and not into a true(r) dimension. When the veil of ideology is lifted we are not suddenly free to see and enjoy reality for what it is, but instead reality itself disappears. To have persisted with this claim throughout at least two decades of widely advertised "freedom from ideology" proclamations is one of the most remarkable achievements of Žižek's critical theory, for in doing so it has almost single-handedly kept the critical field open. The basic argument that claiming freedom from ideology is testament to a deeper enslavement to ideology remains a fundamental indictment of the ruse of liberalism and its capitalist counterpart. Today, while we supposedly enjoy our "capitalist freedoms", we believe more than ever – all the more because "we do not know it", we are not aware of it. Dialectical materialism cannot ignore the materiality of disavowed beliefs, or the convulsively unconscious core of social relations. To claim that creative sublimation is the second, crucial step of the dialectical movement means that its success will be decided on

its ability to install or generate the conditions for new beliefs – beliefs, that is, firmly anchored in that "unconscious knowledge" which is the fundamental prerogative of any viable psychoanalytic epistemology. To put it bluntly, the headless stupidity of the unconscious, in its 'structured amalgamation of language and *jouissance*' (Nobus and Quinn 2007: 6), is too precious, too fundamental a resource to be left in the hands of the enemies of dialectical materialism.

This presupposition is also at the heart of Žižek's turn towards a "theological materialism". One of the socio-political effects of the global triumph of capitalist materialism is the return of theology, and more concretely new religious fundamentalisms. While Žižek tends to claim that the two phenomena (liberal-democratic capitalism and fundamentalism) are not only deeply related but, more properly stated, two sides of the same coin, he engages with Christianity in order to solicit from its narrative a revolutionary dialectic. Without delving into the specifics of Žižek's theological reasoning, suffice it to recall here that his key reference to Hegel's reading of the death of Christ obeys the same dialectical logic as the one discussed so far – simply put, it involves the thoroughly immanent event of the emergence of the excess/monstrosity of Christ qua apocalyptic materialization of God's lack to himself,[5] supplemented by the creative intervention of the Holy Spirit cementing the new community of believers. Thus we have, on the one hand, the radical materiality of the incarnation and crucifixion, representing the two key stages of the event of Christ's irruption on the finite, immanent horizon of being; on the other hand, the resurrection of God as Holy Spirit, whose function is to install in the community a new knowledge bolstered by belief. The Hegelian (Holy) *Spirit* effectively coincides with the Lacanian (Holy) *Ghost* (qua fantasm), in as much as it engenders a paradigmatic sublimation of the traumatic eruption of the Christ-event. In all this, then, 'Christ is the "vanishing mediator" between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community' (in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 29). What we should retain here is the *form* of the dialectical movement, since it is based on an apocalyptic event. Žižek agrees with Thomas Altizer (see Altizer 1998) that the history of Christianity from its inception testifies to an attempt to obscure the properly revolutionary / apocalyptic meaning of Christ's death (see Žižek and Milbank 2009: 261). If there is a *political* question to pose to this materialistic reading of the Christian text, it is probably the following: how do we account for the event of Christ's arrival, which kick-starts the dialectical sequence? As we shall see, this question is central to our understanding of Žižek's political epistemology.

## Materialism reloaded

One of the ways to approach the question of the origins of Žižek's dialectics is to focus on how he understands the passage from the first to the second phase of the dialectical movement. Considering his acute analysis of Karatani's work and especially the understanding of parallax in relation to the notion of value, one is tempted to surmise that Žižek's own overarching grasp of the anti-capitalist strategy to adopt retains the status of the parallax. Žižek's theoretical stance is in this sense easily recapitulated: only *after* the first intervention involving subtraction (disconnection) from the current system of beliefs, will we *become fully aware* of the concrete possibilities we have to activate and subsequently consolidate change. Creative (post-) revolutionary sublimation, in other words, cannot be planned ahead of the subtractive moment, for the simple reason that subtraction itself is aimed, first and foremost, at breaking down our unconscious libidinal attachments to the socio-symbolic field. The psychoanalytic logic is obvious and indisputable: in order to be in a position to plan "the new", we must have detached from our current predicament – an operation which is much more complicated than we might be inclined to believe, for it involves shifting, emptying and reloading the "strongbox" where our unconscious knowledge qua *jouissance* is stored. One can clearly observe in this operation, at the heart of Žižek's dialectics, a classic example of parallax: in Karatani's terms, the connection between the first and the second stage is effectively a *salto mortale*, a leap of faith, *with no a priori guarantee that the outcome will improve the initial situation*. As a negative force impervious to any conscious "planning ahead", subtraction merely clears the slate, opening up the situation to a restructuring effort which from this perspective can only appear radically contingent.

The dialectical process is therefore split into two equally vital and complementary strategic interventions 'between which no synthesis or mediation is possible' (Žižek 2006b: 4). It is apropos this definition of parallax that Žižek draws on his arsenal of references from German idealism and psychoanalysis, insisting, in a Hegelian vein, on the inevitability of "tarrying with the negativity" which defines the parallax itself. In his view, there is no other way of thinking radical emancipation than by working through this negativity. Ultimately, his rehabilitation of dialectical materialism is characterized by the inclusion of the parallax in the sovereignty of the materialistic dimension. Far from asserting the full ontological consistency of material reality as something that exists independently of the subject's activity, Žižek's materialism begins with the claim that what is ontological about matter is its

inconsistency. In fact, it is precisely because of this inconsistency that we can think external reality; material reality exists only insofar as we connect with it by endeavouring to come to terms with the virtual dimension at its core (as in the psychoanalytic example of the infant who "creates" reality when confronted by the deadlock of the other's desire). It is not, however, a question of supplementing the inert meaninglessness of matter with a higher spiritual narrative that explains it by "enchanting" it. While this solution, typical of religions, rightly indicates that standard ("vulgar") materialism is mistaken about its presumed ontological consistency, it is nevertheless blatantly misleading, for it amounts to what Lacan defined as an attempt to cure people by repressing the (psychoanalytic) symptom, i.e. the intractable surplus of meaning. The persistence of this surplus, instead, is testament to the fact that reality never coincides with itself, nor with any suprasensible truth (see Lacan 2004). And Žižek's materialism is based on the groundbreaking insight that the gap constitutive of reality is nothing but the gap constitutive of subjectivity: we *are* the very impossibility that we ascribe to external reality, and that we must constantly disavow or displace if we are to connect with it. The very surplus generated by our attempt to grasp the meaning of the world is both what prevents us from fully grasping it and what allows us to engage with it in its material guise. A material world, that is, emerges through a short-circuiting of inconsistencies: it is the somewhat "magical" product of the disavowed encounter between our lack to ourselves and external reality's radical openness. The strictly speaking virtual coincidence of these two lacks "miraculously" engenders material reality, with all its social, political and economic features. For reality to emerge, then, what needs to be disavowed is precisely the "gaping knowledge" that our activity is always-already included in the complexity of external reality, thus opening it to our intervention and interpretation.

Rather than understand matter in a scientific way, where what counts is its empirical knowledge and mastery, Žižek's materialism tells us that true matter is the strictly speaking "impossible" knowledge that sets up the material world itself, in as much as it stands for the disavowed libido-object, Lacan's Real of *jouissance*. This special object embodies the limits of our knowledge in its coincidence with the ontological crack in external reality. It is crucial for Žižek to insist that the gap we are dealing with vouches for a dialectical materialist stance, for it is through this gap that we need to pass if we are to effect radical change. The point is that to intervene at the level of reality's radical inconsistency, thus promoting a transformative or revolutionary politics, we need first to get in touch with our own disavowed matter, or unconscious knowledge, insofar as it was always responsible for

the emergence of reality. From this perspective, connecting with reality "in a revolutionary mode" – that is, disconnecting from the big Other of capital – depends on a detour through our unconscious *plus-de-jouir*. To suspend the big Other in all its material weight, we must identify with the disavowed matter which, precisely through its disavowal, creates for us the illusion of a minimum of consistency in the way we relate to the external world. What we have here is therefore a reflexive determination of the overarching logic governing Žižek's dialectical materialism, insofar as it is centred on the abyssal gap or parallax between subtraction and sublimation. Ultimately, this parallax is also the deadlock that characterizes the dialectical sequence from its very inception, namely subtraction.

Chapter 10

# Vicissitudes of subtraction

Can subtraction coincide with cynicism? The question has often been raised, directly or indirectly, to chastise or at least cast doubts on Žižek's call for inaction, non-participation, and generally his so-called Bartleby politics. Teresa Ebert has gone as far as to associate Žižek with a stance of 'metacynicism', i.e. 'a cynicism that protects itself from being known as cynical by theorizing the cynical' (Ebert 1999: 400), a point substantially endorsed by Adrian Johnston.[1] Could it be the case that subtraction corresponds to a stance of fetishistic disavowal on the part of the intellectual, allowing him to pursue his critical aims from a disengaged distance? One of the opening aphoristic reflections contained in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, ends with the following defence of "subtracted" intellectual activity:

> For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity. (Adorno 2005: 26)

Typically, Adorno counteracts the stifling pervasiveness of the "administered society" with an injunction, often criticized as "elitist", to withdraw from 'social mixing and participation'. Are we dealing here with the same type of injunction proffered by Žižek? The answer is affirmative only if we take into consideration the beginning of the next aphorism in *Minima Moralia*:

> He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interests. [. . .] The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; [. . .] His own distance from business at large is a luxury which only that business confers. This is why the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates (26).

In Žižek, I would argue, the awareness of the risk implied in subtracting is even more acute than in Adorno (see Žižek 2009c: 128–29). One could disagree with this statement by claiming that the danger of fetishistic disavowal is in principle always present, since this very notion is predicated on unconscious attachments. I might be convinced that I "subtract" for all the right social and political reasons, while unconsciously I fetishize my disengagement through a range of disavowed modalities of enjoyment. What safeguards Žižek's position from this danger, however, is precisely the awareness, at the heart of his lesson, of the necessity of trauma: subtraction is always at least minimally traumatic because I subtract first and foremost from my fetishistic enjoyment of what I profess to hate. Bartleby's stance is therefore uncompromising, for it is validated by the knowledge that to be effective it has to involve some painful rupture at the level of our unconscious attachments.

A nice example of what is involved in subtraction is provided by Ursula Meier's impressive debut film *Home* (2009). A family of five lives happily in an isolated house by a motorway whose construction has been abandoned for years. When the inevitable happens, i.e. the motorway is opened to traffic, they face a difficult decision: to stay despite the growing discomforts (noise, pollution and so on) or abandon their isolated retreat. It is only at this point that subtraction sets in. To comply with his wife's stubborn resolution to stay, the husband, aided by his young son and daughter, completely isolates the house by walling up windows and doors with bricks. Having now trapped themselves inside, they have nothing left to do but patiently await death. The paradox typical of subtraction is that by choosing not to give up their freedom, they come face to face with the unbearable pain that ratifies the endorsement of a truly subtracted (free) position. It is the same obscure pain experienced by Bartleby the scrivener throughout Herman Melville's story. The film's ending in this sense is particularly instructive. On the brink of collapse, the wife, played by Isabelle Huppert, suddenly awakes and driven by an inexplicable urge starts breaking down the walled door, until, eventually, the whole family steps out and silently walks away, enveloped in a kind of trance. The liberating potential of subtraction, inseparable from its traumatic nature, is here explicitly affirmed.

Given this premise, we may legitimately ask ourselves what the true aim of Žižek's "Bartleby's politics" is. What if, Žižek asks, the violence involved in a revolutionary intervention today is the symbolic violence of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to", namely the refusal to participate intended as 'the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation'? (Žižek 2006b: 342). The following, I think, needs to be explored: first, given that

Bartleby is driven, i.e. that his gesture of refusal is both enigmatic and unstoppable, how is this drive supposed to emerge in our capitalist universe dominated by the constant recycling of *jouissance* into "small pleasures" – an invisible operation of recycling which keeps us running around with just enough vitality to feed the matrix? What are the actual potentialities of politicizing this drive towards non-participation in our current constellation? More to the point: do we not already have this Bartleby of non-participation, of clearing the ground for the act, in the infernal yet "liberated" territories of the slums, or, more generally, in relation to any instance of exclusion? Once again, my contention is that if the term surplus has any meaning today, it must be in connection with the social entropy of capitalist production.

One of the open questions about Žižek's particular understanding of subtraction as a political category has to do with its being split between conscious agency and unconscious necessity. In short: should we think of subtraction as a goal to be actively pursued, or as an event that takes place irrespective of our conscious intervention? Can we distinguish between concerted actions that would lead to our "unplugging" from capitalism, and the realization that some of us, in growing numbers, are *already* "unplugged" (since exclusion is a direct, if disavowed, consequence of capitalist dynamics)? Žižek tends not to formulate these questions, which would seem to suggest that, from his standpoint, there is no way of answering them. There is a level where radical conscious intervention turns into the act whose potential it always encompasses; an act that – insofar as it emerges regardless of our strategic intentions – takes on the features of an "objective event". More concisely put: consciousness is always-already traversed and derailed by its internal and yet "other" unconscious reservoir from which the act feeds. In our Žižekian terms, the conscious and unconscious dimensions of subtraction are therefore impossible to tell apart. The indistinction typical of this deadlock can also be transposed at the level of political subjectivity: our conscious intervention is unlikely to develop into radical agency unless it is not only accompanied, but at a certain point properly steered by a drive which puts this agency beyond consciousness (and which at the same time implies that it/we create the traumatism that makes subversion possible); by the same token, we could also argue that we need to be engaged in a well-defined political project, no matter how *à venir*, if we are to successfully capitalize on the "stuckness" of drive. While Žižek as a rule tends to emphasize and privilege the first combination, it is nevertheless clear that, once again, we are faced with a parallax.

The main aim of this brief detour through the ambiguities of subtraction is to show that the parallax nestled at the heart of Žižek's two-pronged

theory of radical change effectively reflects back into the first phase, the implication being that the only way to grasp the magnitude of this theory is to come to terms with the absolute inevitability of the *salto mortale* represented by the notion of parallax, *inasmuch as it affects the dialectical sequence from the beginning*. In other words, it would seem that we cannot simply execute the first phase (subtraction) and then wait for the *salto mortale*, because the latter is foundational. Žižek himself stresses the radical contingency which kick-starts the dialectical sequence: 'there is no preexisting necessity that directs the dialectical process, since this necessity is precisely what arises through this process, i.e., what this process is about' (in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 246). Drawing on Hegel, he insists that 'the gap between notional abstraction and empirical wealth' is 'inscribed into the thing (reality) itself, a tension (antagonism, "contradiction") which triggers the thing's development. As Hegel often repeats, no thing fully fits its (inherent) notion, and this discord ("self-contradiction") is the motor of dialectics' (247). What consequences can we gauge from this insight into reality's contingent self-contradiction? Are we entitled to claim, joining an already vociferous chorus, that Žižek's politics is unworkable?

The most obvious example of the subtractive parallax is Žižek's endorsement of Badiou's thesis that 'it is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent' (Žižek 2006b: 334). The seemingly anti-dialectical injunction to "do nothing" – to refrain from actively attempting to engage in emancipatory struggles insofar as just about any of these struggles today ends up strengthening the system – is a statement that conflates activity and passivity into what looks like a very thick mist, that is to say it brings about the "impossible" status of subtraction *qua* parallax. From Žižek's angle, of course, "doing nothing" does not correspond to a passive stance, but on the contrary it is the name of a dialectical move, in fact the most active anti-capitalist position we can possibly assume given the current impasse. As exemplarily stated by Marcuse,

> we need a political practice of methodical disengagement from and refusal of the Establishment, aiming at a radical transvaluation of values. Such a practice involves a break in the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things. (Marcuse 1972: 15–16)

It is a case of elevating passive-aggressive behaviour to the status of a radical political gesture. But how, exactly? The idea is that the refusal to participate implicit in this version of Hegel's "tarrying with the negative" serves precisely

as the necessary element of disconnection which would allow us to "think again", i.e. to overcome the silent *denkverboten* imposed by today's pervasive (post-)ideological predicament, consequently enabling us, at some unspecified future conjuncture, to engage in political thought proper.[2] A new political project, in other words, can only be formulated if we first detach from the capitalist compulsion to be active (aggressive passivity as opposite of passive aggression) and regain a genuine space for thought. At this level, as we can see, we are back to the original over-arching parallax between subtraction and political agency.

However, it is important to underline how, today, this "prohibition on thinking" functions both as a silent, to an extent unconscious form of self-censorship, and, increasingly, as an explicit, unadulterated ban. On the one hand, we do not dare to even think, let alone collectively discuss, what (we believe) would immediately cause us to appear awkwardly outdated (namely, communism); on the other hand, since 9/11 our liberal democracies have turned more and more illiberal, to the extent that they often openly act or threaten to act against a number of hard-fought civil rights and freedoms. Here we should be realistic and recognize that the struggle takes place on two distinct fields: from one point of view, it would be disastrous, in the name of subtraction, to allow those in power to keep dismantling sacrosanct rights such as the freedom of press, or certain basic conquests of welfarism; and yet, we must constantly remind ourselves that much more is required of us if we truly want to challenge the matrix in the background, whose interests are represented by our political leaders. To counteract these leaders' growing authoritarianism, we need both a direct, pragmatic, "head-on" political strategy based on traditional practices of intervention (demonstrations, strikes, information, etc.), and a more far-sighted plan aimed at regaining the space for authentic dialectics to be woven. More to the point, and to endorse Žižek's overall argument, if we confine ourselves to pragmatic struggles of resistance,[3] we shall never gain any ground against the matrix.

As anticipated, it is clear that as far as subtraction is concerned, and more generally throughout the entirety of Žižek's politics, the main problem concerns the alignment of *necessity* and *freedom*, a key question which Žižek has pondered in more than one occasion. This question becomes particularly pressing if conceived in direct political terms: how can we think of subjective freedom towards a political cause (freedom to act or subtract in the name of a cause) if the actuality of the cause is strictly tied to a radically contingent historical dimension (historicity)? Žižek's answer would seem to be that the fundamental political gesture to accomplish is to recognize the

historical opportunity and, simultaneously, activate the potential of drive. However, if there is nothing particularly original in the invitation to locate the revolutionary opening "thrown up" by historical circumstances, the problematic point is the one concerning drive. What is the use, we may ask, of exercising political pressure if all we know is that radical change happens only through drive, on whose activation we have no control? What is the point, we may continue asking, of engaging in theoretical analyses of the situation when we know that it will all be irrelevant to the "moment of truth", which takes place independently of dialectics, and thus of causal links? What many find disconcerting about Žižek's theory of political engagement can be summed up in the following claim:

> The will to revolutionary change emerges as an urge, as an "I cannot do otherwise", or it is worthless [. . .]. [A]n authentic revolution [. . .] is not something we "ought to do", as an idea for which we are striving, but something we cannot but do, since we cannot do otherwise. This is why today's Leftist worry that revolution will not occur, that global capitalism will just go on indefinitely, is false insofar as it turns revolution into a moral obligation, into something we ought to do while we fight the inertia of the capitalist present. (Žižek 2006b: 334)

Žižek, like Lacan, is not a moralist – he refuses to connect revolution to a *moral* urge. By contrast, it is a matter of being unwittingly caught in the strange, distressing awareness that in our fixation on the task in hand we go "beyond/against ourselves" – that at the crucial moment of our full commitment we have no control over our actions, since we are driven by some unconscious libidinal attachment to an object-cause which, strictly speaking, has no name or form. For this reason the revolutionary intervention per se inevitably retains a psychotic dimension, one where despair mobilizes utopian energies in responding to what is perceived as an apocalyptic historical scenario. The urge of drive is therefore amoral, for it is "in us more than ourselves", beyond our conscious decision to be "in overdrive". However problematic this may seem, to criticize Žižek on the basis of his amoral notion of agency is utterly misplaced. We should instead recall that the whole point of his psychoanalytically indebted critique of ideology is that moral knowledge is *not* a sufficient condition to enact change, let alone to act. Octave Mannoni's fortunate formula *Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .* effectively rules our lives: we are fetishists in practice, regularly displacing belief onto our concrete, material practices, for the simple reason that *we do not know what we truly believe in*, since we are interpellated at the level of

unconscious enjoyment. Our true beliefs are unconscious, and as such they tend to materialize in the proverbial fetish.[4] As we have seen, Lacan's critique of the university discourse comes down to his idea that knowledge is always-already entwined with a surplus which cannot be reduced to a calculable entity. Ultimately, it is this surplus that drives knowledge (including of course scientific knowledge) as well as political change. The reason why Lacan's (and Žižek's) critique of the university discourse cannot be fully assimilated to the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental reason, despite being based on a very similar premise, is that the latter is anchored in a fundamentally Kantian and therefore transcendental apperception of surplus, whereas for Lacan and Žižek "the stars *really* come down to earth",[5] in the sense that the object-*jouissance* is conceived as emphatically immanent.

If we would be mistaken to criticize Žižek's politics on the ground of its formalistic defence of the act (or the act of subtraction), we are nevertheless fully entitled to relate more closely this formalism to questions of content. To problematize the notion of subtraction, for instance, we could start by asking ourselves to what extent it actually tends to reverse into that defence of philosophy which, typically, contents itself with questioning the existing status quo as a way to avoid the infinitely more risky and demanding creative effort of thinking the new. The danger here is that we slip back into the pitfalls of theoretical criticism which, however necessary, displays a marked tendency to congeal, or melt away, into a self-entrenched academic exercise. This can be transposed into more concrete terms: while it is obviously useful to speak of the vital importance of regaining a fertile theoretical ground through successful subtraction from the compulsive "urge to participate", could we not also proceed from the awareness that "subtracted masses" already exist, for, as previously argued, the logic of capitalist expansion necessarily produces uprooted populations and single individuals who are, to use Lacan's famous definition of Antigone, "in between the two deaths", and as such in urgent need of political organization? Furthermore, these masses *are* subtracted *without wanting to*, i.e. without needing either consciousness or the drive to do so, but simply as a result of blind socio-economic dynamics. The bottom line is that *Bartleby is already with us*, and dramatically so. It is, strictly speaking, a "Bartleby without Bartleby", one who does not need passive aggression to subtract, for his existence is already "free" of libidinal attachments to the symbolic order. And, crucially, the task ahead is to acknowledge his existence by thinking ways of filling his empty stance with a new meaning, without abandoning the search for a more pervasive way to enact his "I would prefer not to". In fact, from the specific perspective of the "destructured masses" the task of theorizing subtraction

might even appear a theoretical luxury, since history (more precisely, the history of capitalism) has "already done the job for philosophy", presenting us with the dialectical event whose importance we cannot but continue to emphasize.

At this stage, a final and perhaps decisive question pops up: is it not the case that the parallax concerns not only the minimally psychotic form of the revolutionary act or the unpredictable outburst of the event, but also *the vertiginous dimension of thought itself*, exemplified by the massive task of thinking a new strategic link between the socio-symbolic order and the Real which might challenge and eventually install itself as an effective alternative to the capitalist valorization of *jouissance*? Today's political parallax should be increasingly conceived as an inspired endeavour to construct and politicize a new relation to the fascinating/traumatic excess of *jouissance* which ceaselessly perturbs the social link, no matter how modest, realistic or daring these endeavours will be. Surely, this is also what Žižek has in mind when he discusses subtraction. What nevertheless cannot be emphasized enough is the overlapping of his formalistic definition of the act *qua* confrontation with the Real and the creation of a new political vision capable of recalibrating our existence through *jouissance*. To be politically effective, any instance of subtraction must strive to find a new formula seeking to supplement signification with enjoyment.

Chapter 11

# The invisible rabbit inside the hat

Commenting on his politics, Žižek has once declared: 'I've got the hat, but not the rabbit', the implication being that he has the right (critical) theory but not its practical addendum (Žižek 2003c).[1] Can Žižek's "Bartleby politics" be conceived as a theory that needs the "rabbit" of an Event to actualize itself? In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek poses the following question: does Lacan have a politics? Does Lacan's theory 'imply a precise political stance?' (Žižek 2008a: 100). In replying, he refers to the 'tiresome and stupid designation "the social role of intellectuals" ', claiming that intellectuals have the duty to understand their socio-symbolic milieu by locating its symptomal points, but *not* to change it, which in itself is an absurd demand. He insists that theory in general, and specifically Lacanian theory, is by definition insufficient, it cannot provide us with a *vademecum* on how to change the world. Here Žižek's problem with Yannis Stavrakakis' book *The Lacanian Left* returns. Stavrakakis' mistake resides in his detection and further elaboration of a *direct* link between Lacan and radical democracy: he tries 'to demonstrate that Lacanian theory directly grounds democratic politics'.[2] Žižek argues that Lacan's motto "there is no big Other" does not point in the direction of the acceptance of the inconsistency of the symbolic order, which would suit democracy insofar as 'democracy elevates incompleteness into a principle'; rather, 'one should bear in mind that the democratic subject, which emerges through a violent abstraction from all its particular roots and determinations, is the Lacanian barred subject, $, which is as such foreign to, incompatible with, enjoyment' (101).

## Theory's sublime object

To evaluate the political sustainability of Žižek's critical theory we should begin from the assumption that the psychoanalytic method he subscribes to demands to be thought of, first and foremost, as a critique of traditional political epistemology:[3] what appears as the inability to accomplish the step

to praxis, in the name of that mythical entity called "the unity of theory and practice", is the very gap that bedevils theory (knowledge) itself. One cannot emphasize enough how knowledge, in Lacan, is nothing but the rift (or the "scissor cut", as we find repeatedly stated in *Seminar XVI*) between the conscious "desire to know" and the unconscious "knowledge that does not know itself", which eventually manifests itself as surplus-*jouissance*. In Lacanian epistemology, theory cannot avoid being defined as a "knowledge that runs up against its own self-generated other" (ultimately, the materiality of *jouissance*) – as indeed Freud had anticipated in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, where thought is presented in a variety of emblematic encounters with its inherent obstacles (from slips of the tongue to forgetting of names). Lacan's entire project is based on the critique and attempted subversion of traditional epistemology inasmuch as the latter aims to describe the relationship between theory and reality, knowledge and its empirical referents, thus producing that pervasive valorization of knowledge that typifies the university discourse and the market alike. For Lacan, knowledge matters supremely insofar as one can isolate the nodal points at which *it fails*, thus producing unconscious *truth effects*. Thought is thereby conceived as a topographical structure traversed by generative unconscious cuts rather than as an instrument to systematize phenomena and consolidate meaning. The only certainty about thought is that it fails. Far from retreating into relativism, however, Lacanian theory tells us that these failures are connected with truth inasmuch as *they enable thought to regenerate itself in a different direction*. What we ask here is a very precise question: can a politics be constructed on this inversion of orthodox epistemology; can a politics emerge from, or relate to, the production of unconscious truth effects?

Because of his closeness to the Lacanian epistemological project, Žižek has never made a mystery of the fact that his main philosophical and political interest lies in theorizing the possibility that "things may go wrong" rather than "how they could be right". What would seem to underlie this aim, at least for someone who does not share the Lacanian view, is an evident "pessimism of reason", since the heterogeneous object of thought is recast as thought's own impediment, sanctioning the impossibility of systematizing reality. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno started precisely from this premise: 'The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction' (Adorno 2000: 146). However, differently from Adorno's, the goal of Žižek's dialectics is to salvage the political function of the traumatic encounter with thought's own unconscious surplus by ascribing to it an implicitly generative and potentially transformative power. On this account, to claim that

Žižek's politics "lacks its object" implies missing the point about the inwardness of the object itself; in fact, we could surmise that the main political concern of Žižek's theory is to deploy its own constitutive limitation vis-à-vis praxis as *the only way* to activate its practical potential. The basic structure of this strategy can be observed in Žižek's writing, where obsessive repetition seems aimed at creating the preconditions for the explosion of amassed and frustrated energy seeking a point of release – put differently, the obstinate confrontation with the theoretical limit conceals the attempt to generate a drive towards its practical resolution. This is to say that Žižek conceives the limitation of his theory as the limitation constitutive of theory *tout court* – for in his view thought as such cannot reach directly the empirical other, but instead can "only" posit its own inherent otherness as coincidental with the radical contingency of external reality.

Therein resides the main affinity and at the same time the key difference between Žižek and Badiou. Both their complex theoretical systems are structured around a (sublime) missing event, upon which their politics crucially depend. To relate to politics, they seem to claim, philosophy desperately needs an external event to take place elsewhere from philosophy. In Badiou's terms, for instance, while truths are produced outside the remit of philosophy, the task of philosophy is to constitute a field where the fidelity to these truths can be articulated. In this respect, the theoretical task is to articulate generic procedures in connection with an external event that cannot be thought in advance. Žižek, on his part, insists on 'the minimal gap, the delay, which forever separates an event "in itself" from its symbolic inscription/registration', and claims that this gap is 'the fundamental feature of dialectical-materialist ontology' (Žižek 2000: 57). The implication is that for both Žižek and Badiou theory needs to *Real*ize itself, which means that the sign of its vigour lies not in the illusion of functioning as an Archimedean lever which lifts the world out of its hinges, but in its ability to gather strength from its epistemological limit, from the constitutive gap between itself and its actualization. However, as anticipated, Žižek theorises the *coincidence* or *overlapping* of thought's limit/surplus with the radical inconsistency of external reality, while for Badiou being and event are to be kept apart. Hence Žižek's detection of a "Kantian problem" with Badiou: the only way to solve the dualism between being and event is to assert that the event is the very "crack" in being itself (Hegel's solution), i.e. 'not an external limitation but an *absolutely inherent* limitation':

> The true materialist solution is thus that the Event is *nothing but* its own inscription into the order of Being, a cut/rupture in the order of Being

> on account of which Being cannot ever form a consistent All. There is no Beyond of Being or other-than-Being which inscribes itself into the order of being – there "is" nothing but the order of Being. (Žižek 2004d: 179)

This insight into the consubstantial nature of the rapport between being and event – which replicates Lacan's decisive insight into the osmotic relationship between Symbolic and Real – leads Žižek to claim that, since Being (or the symbolic order) is by definition internally antagonized, we should 'gather the strength to "take over" and assume power, rather than merely persist in the safety of the oppositional stance' (179). While this is undoubtedly the right formal approach to the leftist dilemma concerning political power, what is left suspended is the obvious question: in the name of *which socio-political model* should we dare to take power? I would argue that only by *attempting* to answer this question would we find ourselves in a position to justify the necessity of taking power.

## Epistemological obstacle as condition of possibility

That said, the paradox at the heart of a Lacanian materialist epistemology remains valid: the task of theory is not to propose an idea consistent with itself, but instead to construct a project whose transformative potential depends on its capacity to reflect upon its blind spot – on its conviction that to be socially and politically productive it has to include its own foundations in *jouissance*. Only that way will it avoid fetishizing abstraction, or the idealistic delusion that "the world dances to the tune of ideas". Is not the whole point of Lacan's teaching that knowledge is rooted in *jouissance*, and that the moment we cut the umbilical cord between the two – or in Sohn-Rethel's terms, between intellectual and manual labour – we are done for, condemned to be ruled by an invisible master and to perambulate in a paranoid universe? As with Lacan, Žižek's epistemology hinges on the connection between thought and 'the "material weight" of the historical Real' (Žižek 1994b: 26). What matters is that this Real is not external to thought but its innermost symptom, and that it is only insofar as it "enjoys the symptom" – the very condition for its own (decentred) existence – that thought can lead to praxis – not the other way around (that is, not by keeping the symptom at a distance). Thus, when Žižek claims that 'the "test" of Marxist theory is the truth effect it unleashes in its addressee (the proletarians), in transforming them into emancipatory revolutionary subjects' (in Žižek and Milbank 2009: 236), adding that this is the only way to understand the unity

of theory and practice, the obvious premise is that this generative force connecting theory and praxis can only be conceptualized in relation to the ability to disturb a symptom by definition in excess of a given theory and therefore rooted in the Real of *jouissance*.

If we go along with this reading, it follows that any critical thought concerned with transformative politics should insist on how the object (Lacan's object-libido, *objet a*) is not merely the irreducible external "surplus" that distorts the meaning we give to the world, but the very *cause of signification*, which ultimately coincides with the Lacanian *subject*. In other words, political thought is called upon to confront and assume its own unconscious *jouissance* insofar as this *jouissance* qua limit condenses the generative conditions of possibility for that very political thought. Knowledge produces an obstacle which is simultaneously the only guarantee that knowledge can renew itself. Kant was the first to emphasize the paradoxical role of this obstacle when he argued that self-consciousness depends on the subject's radical alienation from itself (on the gap between the "I" of transcendental apperception and the "I" of empirical experience). Lacan, inspired by Hegel's critique of Kant's formalism, develops this logic via the crucial insight that the Kantian "thing which thinks" (the empty framework of thought, the "I" of transcendental apperception) is not to be read as a transcendental entity but as the object-libido (surplus-*jouissance*) situated at the very core of the subject. What in Kant was a transcendental category mediating between noumenon (thing-in-itself) and phenomenon (empirical reality), in Lacan "falls down" and becomes an objective remainder embodying the radical finitude/limit of subjective knowledge and simultaneously the intrinsic inconsistency of the object of knowledge itself. What we have is in fact a short-circuit between subject and object which relies on a (disavowed) temporal loop: the subject proper can apprehend itself only as a kind of "after shock", that is to say as a reverberation of his shocking encounter with itself qua *objet a* – the self-alienated object of the other's desire. When we say that the subject is always-already embedded in objective reality, we do not merely refer to the academic cliché that it is moulded by its social environment, but much more radically that it materializes the very inconsistency of objective reality itself.[4] This is why the aim of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to bring about the overlapping of the analysand's *plus-de-jouir* (which in French means both "extra" and "impossible" enjoyment) and *objet a*, i.e. the equation between two "impossible" objects/leftovers which no mirror could reflect nor any thought symbolize.[5]

This reading also allows us to see what is misleading about the fashionable Cultural Studies (and multiculturalist) understanding of the gap

between "self" and "other": its ultimate and as a rule unacknowledged paradox concerns the fact that the liberal act of legitimising the other's narrative allows the self, or one's (ethnic, sexual, ideological) identity, to keep at bay its own constitutive inconsistency, its *internal* otherness. What is perceived as "other" is not only a much more problematic and disturbing (alien) "thing" than we generally wish to acknowledge, but it also embodies, in another case of Hegelian "reflexive determination", the very obstacle or inconsistency at the heart of what we are (our identity). So the problem with the attitude of respect for the other's diversity and concurrent criticism for instances of cultural/narrative closure lies not, of course, in the explicit aim of this attitude/criticism. It is rather to be found in its shortsightedness towards its own hidden presuppositions: that is, in the inability or unwillingness to problematize the ideological co-ordinates that sustain the critical gaze. Thus, the need to restore the autonomous and legitimate diversity of "other narratives" often functions in subtle ideological terms, namely as a kind of "fantasy screen", an unquestioned fascination with the other qua fetish-object which allows the gaze of the critic-observer to preserve the unproblematic identity of his or her own subject position. The point is that hypostatizing the other's right to make his or her voice heard is likely to result in deflecting attention away from a critical exploration of how our point of view is never ideologically neutral, but instead always constituted through the foreclosure of its excessive, "internally external" cause – or in Lacan's terms, its surplus-*jouissance*. And it goes without saying that this historically specific surplus, today, is co-extensive with capital.

To clarify the question of the surplus of thought, let us make another quick reference to Adorno's key work, *Negative Dialectics*. When Adorno writes about the "preponderance of the object" he comes very close to this Lacanian notion that the gap between thought and its object is internal to thought itself; and yet, he falls short of the final reflexive move: 'To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject' (Adorno 2000: 183). What is missing here is the realization that 'the meaning of objectivity' is always-already decided by the subject in its radically decentred nature. In fact, to speak of the preponderance of the object is homologous to speaking of the preponderance of the subject, for reality emerges as an object of cognition only on condition that the material surplus of thought is disavowed and transposed into the sublime object of desire "out there". Quoting from two of Žižek's book titles, we could say that what is at stake is the "sublime object of ideology" insofar as it conceals the "absent centre of political ontology". I can think something (for instance, a politics of emancipation) only if the

constitutive non-coincidence of my thought with itself is externalized as *objet a*, the elusive X which sets my desire to know (my thought) in motion. Thus we are dealing with not merely theory's distance from empirical reality, but simultaneously the distance of thought from itself (from its internal object) which is precisely what allows signification to emerge. When, against Hegel, Adorno argues that the object 'is not positively and immediately at hand' and yet 'by no means a thought product' (189), he misses the Hegelian (and Lacanian) paradox whereby only by yielding unreservedly to the object (*objet a*) can the subject find itself; only by going through to its epistemological limit, can thought realize itself. In his defence of the hard otherness of the object against thought, Adorno overlooks the fact that such external kernel is constitutive of thought itself. The alien "thing" is the *internal precondition* for signification. Passages such as the following show the extent to which Adorno tends to ignore the Lacanian insight into the radical reflexivity of the dialectical movement:

> The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own. (191)[6]

The claim that the alien is 'beyond that which is one's own' is emblematic of Adorno's distance from Lacan. By contrast, the novelty of Žižek's intervention in today's philosophical scene is to be located in the formal principle which runs through his mode of thinking, inasmuch as his epistemology is founded on an uncompromising model of dialectical reflexivity. This again should tells us that whenever we detect in Žižek's philosophy a lack of practical potential, the first thing to do is remind ourselves that this deficiency is by definition embedded in theory itself: it is both its ultimate frontier and simultaneously, as we have seen, its disavowed cause. What follows, in Žižek, is the more general consideration that the actualization of any political theory that aims at subverting the status quo depends on an unexpected event which ruptures the seemingly unbreakable continuum of history (or an act which opens up the possibility of radical subjective change) and is perceived as materializing not so much the theory behind it but the very deadlock of (that) theory. From this angle, the task of political thought would seem to be not just to propose a consistent project, but especially to intervene in the symptomal points of our socio-symbolic order in the attempt to seize the Benjaminian "revolutionary chance" coincidental with history's sudden openness. What follows logically is that theory can only

connect with praxis at the level of the Real, and not at the level of conscious rational signification. More extensively: precisely because the only point of contact between theory and praxis is in the Real, signification needs to be at least minimally distorted and betrayed if it is to successfully actualize itself. This is why according to Žižek any explosion of revolutionary enthusiasm is sustained less by the faithful application than by the (at least minimal) betrayal of a revolutionary idea, which nevertheless remains absolutely necessary as that which triggers the dialectical sequence:

> the fundamental lesson of revolutionary *materialism* is that revolution must strike twice, and for essential reasons. [. . .] what the "first revolution" misses is not the content, but *the form itself* – it remains stuck in the old form, thinking that freedom and justice can be accomplished if we simply put the existing state apparatus and its democratic mechanisms to use. (Žižek 2002: 7)

With regard to this betrayal, Žižek claims that 'every theory changes (is "betrayed") in its practico-political application, and the Hegelian point to be made here is that, in such cases, the "truth" is not simply on the side of theory – what if the attempt to actualize a theory renders visible the objective content of this theory, concealed from the gaze of the theorist itself?' (104–05). Of course, this is a key Lacanian point, for the 'objective content' Žižek refers to is the surplus of *jouissance*, the Real *qua* invisible symptomal point of theory. If actualizing theory means acknowledging that theory is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change, then we could also understand this as the necessity for theory to find itself in its beyond, beyond thought as such, i.e. in conjunction with surplus-*jouissance*: the very *jouissance* which is at once inherent to and inextricable from the object (practical activity). The split between theory and its surplus can be appreciated through a banal example from our everyday life. When we write down a thought, we often realize that in the act of writing it a supplement has emerged that belongs to thought only insofar as thought qua abstract activity *could not reflect it*, insofar as it remains thought's blind spot. This is the key surplus of *jouissance* related to practice, to acting, and yet it simultaneously belongs to theory. It is not external to thought (as the university discourse maintains) but the most fundamental core of thought itself, and therefore invisible to it. The lesson is that thought needs to actualize itself through its own *jouissance*, through its daring to go beyond itself in the awareness that at some point it will be betrayed. Thought is inseparable from the object-libido, despite philosophy's millenarian attempt to bewitch the

heterogeneity of *jouissance* and affirm its own abstraction, clothed in fixed and autonomous concepts such as "subject" and "object".[7]

Apropos the explosion of the event and the concomitant topos of the "betrayal of theory", Žižek suggests that any subversive intervention has to mobilize what is at hand, some of which may happen to be rather uncomfortable bedfellows. For example: 'It is this very reliance on the "vilest" racist, anti-feminist, etc., motifs that gave the Iranian revolution the power to move beyond a mere pragmatic power struggle' (Žižek 2008a: 112). Again, Žižek's defence of Foucault's appraisal of the Iranian revolution originates in the parallactic tension between thought and practice. He does not merely defend the risk taken by a radical intellectual who was then chastised precisely for this choice, and eventually recoiled into the problematic of aesthetics of the self; rather, he tests the interdependence of theory and practice, the fact that true theory needs some sort of empirical betrayal to be actualized. The same applies to Žižek's reading of Heidegger's infamous Nazi engagement, insofar as Heidegger, probably more than any other modern philosopher, was aware of the necessity for thought to establish a link with the Real. Of course, neither Heidegger nor Foucault was instrumental to the events they commented upon. Žižek's point, rather, is that with their engagements they dared to disturb the deadlock intrinsic to their theories.[8]

My thesis, however, is a different one, and can be summed up in the following rhetorical question: what if what is required today is less a Foucauldian or Heideggerian post-eventa l "intellectual excitement" than a theory of practical intervention linked to both the *pars destruens* and the *pars construens* – primarily to subtraction, but also to a creative project of reconstruction? A theory which, more importantly, might undo its dependence on the radical heterogeneity of either the event or the act by giving body to the very *otherness* internal to itself? We have seen that Žižek's epistemology makes apparent how the truly creative moment in thought begins with thought's encounter with its Real – its inherent contradiction, which, as Adorno had put it, indicates both 'that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived', and that 'the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form' (Adorno 2000: 5).[9] It is only this vertiginous parallax of thought that fulfils theory's task, for at this limit-point of negative self-fulfilment theory must await the opening that will actualize it through its betrayal. Differently from Adorno, who is faithful to Marx in claiming that materialism begins with the dialectical acknowledgement of the preponderance of the object of cognition, Žižek, via Lacan, suggests that the acknowledgement of *objet a* in its impermeability to thought should be complemented with the dialectical insight into how this recalcitrant object was

always-already part of thought – thought's own disavowed presupposition; and that only with this insight does historical materialism begin.[10] Conversely, epistemological failure (the failure of thought vis-à-vis the object of cognition) means that this very object is internally antagonized, traversed by an inerasable surplus – and it is precisely the disavowal of this indigestible surplus within reality that makes it "thinkable". This is why Žižek endorses 'the crucial Hegelian gesture of transposing epistemological limitation into ontological fault' (Žižek 2000: 55), highlighting the continuity between epistemology and ontology: knowledge and being are inseparable domains insofar as they are joined together by their respective inconsistencies.[11]

It is nevertheless worth noting how close Adorno is to Žižek's "Lacano-Hegelian" dialectics, for his notion of the precedence of objectivity is not predicated against the naively idealistic notion of the autonomy of the subject, but is instead sustained by the awareness that the mind itself is internally contradicted by its own otherness, or somatic moment: 'Physicality emerges at the ontical pole of subjective cognition, as the core of that cognition' (Adorno 2000: 193–94); or even more clearly:

> Only if the I on its part is also not I does it react to the not-I. Only then does it "do" something. Only then would the doing itself be thinking. Thinking, in a second reflection, breaks the supremacy of thinking over its otherness, because it always is otherness already, within itself. [. . .] the mind's nonbeing moment is so intertwined with existence that to pick it out neatly would be the same as to objectify and falsify it. (201–02)

And yet, what Adorno fails to fully accomplish is the vital step of recognizing the *necessary* coincidence of the "sublime" materiality of the object (*objet a*) and the disavowed materiality of thought. The surplus element that derails or distorts our perception of the external world is effectively *the same surplus inherent to thought* that thought needs to deactivate in order to engage in what we call thinking. As in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up*, the photographer discovers in the precarious objectivity of the image (*objet a*, the blurred photographic enlargement of the dead body) nothing less than the foreclosed core of his own self – which is why the discovery is traumatic. The crucial political aspect to stress is that for no reason can surplus evaporate – instead, it demands a theory of emancipation that attempts to connect with theory's disavowed presuppositions.

Chapter 12

# 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in it'

At this stage, however, we are again compelled to ask if and to what extent Žižek actually develops his epistemological insight to its maximum potential – if he draws all the necessary consequences. Is it not the case that, precisely because of Žižek's correct dialectical insight into the political importance of linking theory with its inherent obstacle/surplus, which is simultaneously the surplus of the object of cognition, as a rule he remains within the field of critical theory rather than daring to creatively confront the Real of his thought? Could we not suggest, for example, that by insisting on the unpredictable "otherness" of the act, by definition legitimated by a psychotic leap, what we forsake is precisely the inventive/psychotic moment *within thought* that must be endemic in every attempt to construct a genuinely subversive political theory? From want of a better expression, what do we gain from the precious insight that theory must disturb its own self-generated *jouissance*? If we limit ourselves to this stance, do we not risk getting caught in that same theoretical loop or conceptual fetishism we had initially intended to move away from? In the final analysis, if the task of theory is to dare to unravel its immanent otherness *qua* disavowed presuppositions, this task only acquires meaning if aligned with the attempt to elaborate and advance an audaciously creative socio-political project whose consistency is equal to, and materializes, the Real limit of theory itself. More than ever, today we need a theory that, precisely because aware of its constitutive impasse, gathers the courage to challenge the current social deadlock not only through the standard paths of critical thought, but also by fostering a creative desire to redefine the future relations of production and consumption in connection with surplus-*jouissance*. When facing the constitutive surplus of thought, which renders it inconsistent, we have only one way of avoiding both a relativism complicit with oppression and its specular image in blind universalism: we must translate this surplus into a vision which reinvents the strategic role of surplus itself in relation to the socio-symbolic order.

The argument that the creative moment must await the "liberation of thought" through successful subtraction, or the unpredictable explosion of an event which is always at least minimally detached from its registration in a meaningful knowledge, is ultimately self-defeating for at least two reasons: (a) the state of subtraction is increasingly immanent to our experience of social life – there are millions of people who are literally disconnected from the capitalist logic of production and consumption – not only outside but also, increasingly, inside Empire; (b) a political theory that does not include "seeds of the future" by defying the material and ideological framework from which it speaks, by definition cannot even dream to connect with empirical reality in the struggle for emancipation. The only chance emancipatory thought has to survive when deprived of its last pockets of active resistance is to perform a short-circuit between its subtraction and radical reinvention: the urge to subtract, or the necessity of the event, must coincide with a creative, to an extent even visionary drive which dares to "think (what from our perspective seems) the impossible".

## In thought more than thought

To truly live up to its notion, philosophy has at some point to risk "losing its head", i.e. attempt to encroach upon its implicit Real. To paraphrase Žižek, the event must be "in thought more than thought itself", a constellation that appears "impossible" from within our historical coordinates. It must be clear that I am not suggesting that philosophy should enjoy a privileged access to the production of "absolute truths". Rather, insofar as philosophy by definition deals with reflexive representations, it deals first and foremost with the excess produced by its own ambition to represent the world, i.e. Lacan's truth as *mi-dire*. In Zupančič's words:

> representation as such is a wandering excess over itself; representation *is* the infinite tarrying with the excess that springs not simply from what is or is not represented (its "object"), but from this act of representation itself, from its own inherent "crack" or inconsistency. The Real is not something outside or beyond representation, but the very crack of representation. (Zupančič 2004: 199)

While this is a well-rehearsed Lacanian/Žižekian topos that highlights the interdependence of the Symbolic and the Real, what is to be stressed if theory is to truly exhaust its political potential is that the "crack" of the Real be

conceived also, or simultaneously, as a symbolic enterprise. As far as the Real qua crack in the edifice of thought is concerned, the trans-strategic dimension must be made to coincide with thought's own attempt to realize itself beyond its historically given conceptual framework. Such a claim does not intend to domesticate the excess of the Real; on the contrary, it aims to preserve this excess within thought. Polonius' words about Hamlet should be taken seriously, and yet their sense decontextualized and unashamedly inverted. The significance of his remark that "there is method in his madness", which in Shakespeare is meant to capture Hamlet's artful passivity, should be turned around: it is only by conceiving the madness of the act as a reflective intrusion into the Real of *cogito* that theory can vindicate its political ambition. It is worth underlining how this ambition is fully inscribed within Žižek's theoretical edifice. One only has to look at how convincingly he emphasizes that, against the standard interpretation, with his notion of the unconscious Lacan intended to return to the rationalist project of Cartesian subjectivity. For Lacan, the subject of the unconscious is synonymous with *cogito*. Along these lines, Žižek claims that the unconscious is 'the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought' (Žižek 1989: 19); or, more explicitly put, it is

> the disembodied rational machine that follows its path irrespective of the demands of the subject's life-world; it stands for the rational subject in so far as it is originally "out of joint", in discord with its contextualized situation: the "Unconscious" is the crack that makes the subject's primordial stance something other than "being-in-the-world". [. . .] The paradox is that once we throw out the Cartesian rational subject of self-consciousness, we lose the Unconscious. (Žižek 2000: 62–3)

It is from this conceptualization of the unconscious as the repository of a disavowed, "impossible" rationality that the urge to think the new should emerge. As anticipated, this urge does not demand that we gentrify the otherness pertaining to the unconscious of the Freudian-Lacanian tradition. In fact, one should accept that what is at stake there, in the unconscious, is the immortality of the death-drive, with its shattering impact on our "world" qua 'interconnected texture of significations and social practices' (65). Against any temptation to domesticate the unconscious, we should acknowledge that a new vision of our social reality can only emerge in the form of the death-drive, insofar as the latter suspends our attachment to our world and in the same move connects us with a "new thought".

The chief dilemma for both Žižek and Badiou is how to relate thought to the event. The only solution is dialectical: the event is always-already part of

the economy of thought. It is thought's task to unravel it. For both thinkers there is an abyss – the abyss of a parallax – between thought and reality. Drawing expressly on this question, Peter Hallward levels the following accusation against Badiou (and Žižek):

> By what criteria can we isolate the element of pure contingency from cumulative structural contradictions or varying levels of solidarity and organization operative among the elements of the evental site? What is the status of eagerly anticipated or laboriously prepared events? To what extent is an event the result of preliminary acts of resistance? Isn't it more accurate to say that events are *relatively* unpredictable, that some are more unexpected than others, since what is unprecedented for some members of the site may be experienced (if not opposed) by others as part of a larger and longer trajectory? [. . .] it is surely one of the great virtues of Badiou's account of the subject that it, like Žižek's or Lacan's, remains irreducible to all the forces (historical, social, cultural, genetic . . .) that shape the individual or ego in the ordinary sense. On the other hand, the lack of any substantial explanation of subjective empowerment, of the process that enables or inspires an individual to become a subject, again serves only to make the account of subjectivation unhelpfully abrupt and abstract. (Hallward 2004: 16–17)

These are no doubt reasonable observations which by now have achieved a wide consensus in the critical literature on Badiou's and Žižek's politics. However, it seems to me that they fail to bring the emphasis on the key epistemological question. Thought is not a prerogative of philosophy – the slaves thought, they had knowledge-at-work, which springs from the unconscious. The whole point of Lacan's critique of Marx is that thought includes its unthought, and as such exceeds what it merely countable and demonstrable in advance. It is philosophy's task to create a connection with this unthought, not in the sense of colonizing it, but to bring out what we might call the Real reflexivity of thought, its ability to think itself beyond its own historically given coordinates. Judging from his books and their success, Žižek knows how to use *jouissance* – he knows how to make his theory exciting through an inimitable array of examples and interpretations from popular culture, which, after all, are also there to be enjoyed (in the complex Lacanian ambiguity of the term). The same kind of ability is required today in the political thought of the left: not to make people laugh, but to anchor the "eternal idea of Communism" (Badiou) in *jouissance*.

## Žižek, Lenin, Badiou

Can we think a truly emancipatory politics without class struggle? Can we think a future non-capitalist society without the topos of the appropriation of the means of production? In the Introduction of his book on Lenin, Žižek emphasizes the importance of the Leninist legacy contained in the following (from today's perspective) 'zombie-concepts': 'the ruthless focusing on the class struggle, the Party as the privileged form of organization, the violent revolutionary seizure of power, the ensuing "dictatorship of the proletariat"' (Žižek 2002: 3). From Žižek's point of view, these concepts need to be re-thought in conjunction with new master-signifiers, new names and relations that are able to reconfigure our rapport to surplus. Lenin himself, after the shock of 1914 (when almost all European Social Democratic parties voted for war credits), had to reinvent the socialist strategy, which until then he had elaborated mainly in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902). Žižek's suggestion is that today we are back, as it were, to pre-Leninist times, shocked by the disaster of the Socialist experiment and desperately in need of a new strategy that might be embodied by a narrative which, for engagement and utopian urge, might match *The State and Revolution* (1918)[1] – regardless of how this urge might be "betrayed" post-facto and turned into more realistic measures, as indeed happened with Lenin. '"Lenin" stands for the compelling freedom to suspend the stale existing (post-)ideological co-ordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* (prohibition on thinking) in which we live – it simply means that we are allowed to think again' (11).

Even more pointedly, Žižek claims, apropos *The State and Revolution* and Lenin's subsequent engagement, that '[w]hat we should stick to is the *madness* [. . .] of this Leninist utopia'. This call is a fundamental axiom for any coming engagement, for it embodies precisely a "method in madness" which, to put it with Neil Harding quoted by Žižek, completely subverted 'the vocabulary and grammar of the Western tradition of politics', in a way that astounded both other prominent members of the Bolshevik Party and Lenin's own wife Nadezhda Krupskaya (5). Thus, when Žižek asks: 'Are we, within our late capitalist closure of the "end of history", still able to experience the shattering impact of such an authentic historical opening?' (6), we should perhaps reformulate the question as "Are we able to conceive of a theory that might mobilise the utopian urge corresponding to today's historical opening?" Any instance of political separation that refuses representation and dialectics is destined to remain abstract, a proverbial call in the desert. But for all this we need political imagination, a new figure of thought,

a "madness" of thinking which would urge us to move beyond the current field of legitimate representability.

With Badiou's project of "generic communism", as well as with other theories of pure politics, or metapolitics, we remain stuck, paradoxically, within the *infinite* potentiality of an event-bound political subjectivity. The Badiouian "communist hypothesis" depends on the ability to create 'a new relationship between the real political movement and ideology' (Badiou 2009b: 113) which proceeds from the faithfulness to an event. What we should not miss, however, is that, despite its formidable polemical value, it is an *orientation* that seeks to realize itself at an *ideal future point*, more precisely in Marx's vision of 'a state organizing the transition towards a non-state, a power of non-power, a dialectical form of the withering away of the state' (109). As it can be appreciated, the weight is firmly placed on the *ideality* of the dialectical movement rather than on the necessity to conceive this very movement as bound to, or anchored in, a non-symbolizable surplus. It is because of its infinite perspectival trajectory that Badiou's communist hypothesis, which he divides into historical sequences,[2] needs to be constantly supplemented by a reflection on Lacan's surplus, a notion which no present or future social link can afford to ignore – including the "communist idea". Precisely in advancing the hypothesis of the communist social link, then, it is not enough to theorize an unverifiable event which might beget the new communist sequence. Instead, what anyone concerned with the communist hypothesis is called to verify and actualize is the connection between Lacan's surplus and the unthought of our miserable socio-political constellation. We need to dare to imagine the density of a configuration of the unrepresented within a communist structure of representation to come. Unless we attempt such a theoretical leap, the call for subtraction will keep running counter to dialectics, and with it to the idea of the transitivity of power. Subtraction supplemented by the communist hypothesis alone leaves us with a political subject with no density, bereft of any substantive fiction. One should not give up on the idea that emancipation is ultimately realized in a structure of representation, *inclusive of its repressed underside*.

Although Žižek has distanced himself from Badiou's implicitly idealistic construction of the communist hypothesis, he shares with his French colleague not only the much-needed courage – which our best politicians emphatically lack – to re-open ideological possibilities in that stolidly self-referential field we still call politics; but also, more specifically, the belief that emancipatory thought relies on the emergence of an extra-philosophical "object" (an act, or an event engendering a truth procedure). With regard to the latter conviction, the (obvious) point to reiterate is that

the excess of an objective situation (a crisis, a state of emergence, etc.) does not, in itself, suffice to engender change, for we also need to operate at the parallactic level whereby the excess of the situation coincides with the excess of thought itself. Thought must live up to the potential of its generative "other side" – it cannot wait patiently for an event to unfold its potentiality, leaving to chance (or, worse, to the enemy) the post-evental redefinition of the situation. When Žižek claims, apropos Lenin, that 'we should venture the revolutionary *act* not covered by the big Other' (Žižek 2002: 8), this applies not only to the actual historical situation in its vertiginous opening, but first and foremost to thought itself. For thought, the revolutionary act *cannot arrive too early*.

The problem with the majority of leftist political thinkers today is that they rely, whether consciously or unconsciously, on an axiomatic belief in the pre-eminence of the event over the creative energy of thought. My wager is that once the event is posited as an unpredictable break occurring out there in the historical situation, the emancipatory potential of thought is already half-lost. In this scenario, thought can only hope to be able to recognize the alleged rupture in the order of things, and attempt to live up to a future political task. The only alternative here lies in apprehending the overlapping of thought and the act, in the sense of conceiving the act as coterminous with the Real of thought. Thus, to think dialectically would mean to grasp the parallax separating thought from the act as a thought-act which can only legitimize itself by itself within thought. The dialectical articulation between subject and object would be internal to both, and dialectics would disengage from the obsolete and naive opposition of subjective and objective conditions – between theory and practice, private consciousness and social being.

We must stress that Žižek is fully aware of the necessity to supplement theory with a creative moment directly linked to negativity, 'which Lacan rendered in his notion of the deep connection between death drive and creative sublimation: in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive (the Hegelian self-relating absolute negativity) has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place and thus making it ready for creation' (Žižek 2004d: 167). This is indeed the key political claim advanced by Žižek, in relation to which, however, we feel entitled to add the following questions: "when will we be ready for creative sublimation? Is it not time to realize that the future has arrived, that subtraction is already here with us, and that therefore we must set about with the task of *thinking* sublimation?" Žižek typically contends that 'death drive does the negative work of destruction, of suspending the existing order of Law, thereby, as it were, clearing

the table, opening up the space for sublimation which can (re)start the work of creation' (172). As we have established, this distinction should be endorsed and retained, for the negative moment of suspension is necessary. Nonetheless, we should also remember that this intervention of the negative involves a temporal short-circuit, whose function is to make us aware of the potential for sublimation within thought.

## The surplus of knowledge

In her perspicacious analysis of the Oedipus myth, Alenka Zupančič focuses on Lacan's central thesis (central also to this book) that knowledge is split between a "knowledge that *knows* itself" and a "knowledge that *does not know* itself", with the latter "doing the work" and thereby functioning as the means to surplus-*jouissance*, and truth. In Part 1 we have discussed precisely the connection between know-how and surplus-*jouissance* in the context of Lacan's critique of surplus-value, suggesting that this connection should be at the heart of any future non-capitalist theory of production. In a key passage of *Seminar XVII* quoted by Zupančič, Lacan claims: 'It is by means of knowledge as means of enjoyment that work gets done, the work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning. This obscure meaning is that of truth'. So what is the relation between knowledge that does not know itself and truth? Lacan tells us that the answer is encapsulated in Oedipus' confrontation with the Sphinx, for Oedipus' answer to the riddle is a statement – an enunciation – in the form of a wager, i.e. not sustained by the "knowledge network" articulated in the big Other. Zupančič rightly emphasizes how this "half-said" (*mi-dire*) turns into a truth only when the subject becomes the "hostage of his word", that is to say, assumes responsibility for his wager: 'The moment the subject gives his answer to the riddle, the words of his response are neither true nor false, they are an anticipation of the truth which becomes truth only in the consequences of these words' (Zupančič 2000: 203). What this alludes to is an act of creation, a *wager* that takes place within the *totality* of knowledge, since it dares to disturb the knowledge that does not know itself in order to reconfigure the knowledge that knows itself:

> Oedipus' act, his utterance of a word, is not simply an outrage, a word of defiance launched at the Other, it is also an act of creation of the Other (a different Other). Oedipus is not so much a "transgressor" as the "founder" of a new order. [. . .] The "structure" of Oedipus' act is the structure of all discoveries: the effect of the "shock of truth" is to restructure the

> field of a given knowledge (of knowledge that "knows itself") and to replace it with another knowledge. (204)

To this I would simply add that the act qua word, or "shock of truth", is to be conceived less as a magical *tuche* or opening of potentialities than as an enunciation which is *both a wager into unknown knowledge and its text*, the narrative concretion of that potentiality. The problem with preserving the pure distinction between the act and the following "weaving of knowledge" is that it risks translating into that negative dialectics (Adorno's) according to which the object remains external to thought. Instead, the Hegelo-Lacanian paradigm endorsed by Žižek would seem to suggest not only that the object is internal to thought, its disavowed engine, but more crucially that, ultimately, thought can *only* be conceived as that which embraces its unknown knowledge. In politico-epistemological terms, the implication is that a different type of knowledge is always-already included (even *secretly at work*) in what we profess to know, insofar as it gives body to its (traumatic) object. From this standpoint, the Real is less a void or gaping abyss than a text awaiting its actualization in thought. Although our symbolic order is colonized by capital with its regime of fantasies and little pleasures, its totality is not-all in the sense that its gaps and contradictions can only be fully grasped as *real* gaps and contradictions if represented by/through a radically different text. Such a text "traverses the capitalist fantasy" and proposes to construct a new symbolic order by way of theorizing a new way of quilting the signifying chain. Of course, meaning as such is radically contingent and always emerges, as Lacan put it, *après-coup* (or in Freud's terms, *Nachträglichkeit*), for it relies on the intervention of an act implanting a master-signifier which, in turn, works retroactively to set up the symbolic order. Therein lies the significance of Hegel's well-known metaphorical reference to the owl of Minerva: it flies at dusk, after what it has accomplished during the day; "understanding" by necessity follows "the act". However, this axiom does not preclude us from conceiving of the required intervention as a theoretical model which retains the formal features of the act, i.e. it appears impossible from the symbolic coordinates from which it is hypothesized and constructed, and yet does not hesitate to (re)present itself as socio-political knowledge.

What is at stake is neither a strategy aimed at forcing the encounter with the Real, nor a project aimed directly at the traumatism of the event. What both these stances fail to consider is the epistemological insight that the Real of *jouissance* is internal to knowledge. As Žižek has emphasized, the notion of *jouissance* in the late Lacan undergoes a significant shift, in that it

goes from being unattainable and ever-elusive to incarnating a disturbing surplus we can never get rid of. It manifests itself as a bothering remainder reminding us that whatever we do, think or desire, is inherently "derailed" by a certain indefinable excess. What counts for us in this definition is that surplus be conceived as what supplements any "knowledge that knows itself". It is, in other words, the very substance of drive as opposed to desire, which is always coterminous with the stabilizing intervention of meaning. This is the ultimate difference between desire and drive for the subject:

> while the subject of desire is grounded in the constitutive *lack* (it ex-sists in so far as it is in search of the missing Object-Cause), the subject of drive is grounded in a constitutive *surplus* – that is to say, in the excessive presence of some Thing that is inherently "impossible" and should not be here, in our present reality – the Thing which, of course, is ultimately *the subject itself.* (Žižek 2000: 304)

The above definition of drive leads us to connect epistemology with politics. To put it succinctly, what we need today is a thought that conceives itself as driven, beyond a "meaningful fantasy" that would only serve as a defence mechanism against the Real of thought:

> Even if drive is thus conceived as a secondary by-product of desire, one can still maintain that desire is a defence formation against drive: the paradox is that desire functions as a *defence against its own product*, against its own "pathological" outgrowth, that is, against the suffocating *jouissance* provided by drive's self-enclosed circular movement. (311)

The real of anti-capitalist thought, then, precisely because it is given to us in the form of a "knowledge that does not know itself", needs to be translated into a *political* wager – into a "mad" wager concerning the possibility of a radically different socio-political order. This intention has to do with the previously mentioned aspect captured by Lacan with the pun *jouis-sens* (enjoy-meant). Lacan claims that 'between knowledge and jouissance, there is a *littoral*' (Lacan 2001: 14), by which he means an unclear limit-dimension that is both language and *jouissance*, or better *jouissance* in language. The aim here is to go from Lacan's "linguistricks", his puns denoting the overlapping of language and *jouissance*, to a knowledge that materializes the *jouissance* inherent in the very thought that it needs to articulate itself. In this respect, Žižek's defence of "high theory" against engaged intellectuals like Noam Chomsky – who 'likes to underscore how

unimportant theoretical knowledge is for progressive political struggle' (Žižek 2002: 4) – should translate not only into the widespread recalibration of key philosophical issues, but also into the confrontation with the hidden projectuality of theory itself, which has to do with its materiality. As Adrian Johnston puts it:

> From a proper Lacanian perspective, the very insistence on an opposition between language (qua structure) and materiality, between the supposedly idealist focus on linguistically mediated cognition and the appeal to the foundational role of some sort of non/ extra-linguistic "stuff," is, at least psychoanalytically speaking, untenable. For the early Lacan as much as for the late Lacan, the forcing of a choice such as that between an idealism of the signifier and a materialism of "the Thing" is tantamount to the erroneous endorsement of an utterly false dilemma. The later Lacan's neologism "*jouis-sens*" ("enjoy-meant") succinctly signals his rejection of this either/or. (Johnston 2007)

One can only agree with a critique asserting that Lacan's theory of the signifier is materialistic: 'Couldn't Lacan's ideas serve as justifications for the view that theorizing itself is a mode of concrete practice, especially since psychoanalysis renders problematic standard conceptions of the distinction between thinking and acting?' (Johnston 2007). More precisely, what is required is the courage to conceive of theorizing not only as interpretation, which in itself cannot break through the social fantasy and its endless chain of alibis, but also as a reorientation of the subject in its relation to the fundamental fantasy. The traversal of the fantasy must be regarded as synchronous with, or immediately conducive to, the construction of a new fantasy space – a space for meaning to be articulated, and therefore bolstered by a different fundamental fantasy, insofar as the latter gives body to an unconscious knowledge holding the key to the basic configuration of the subject vis-à-vis the residue of *jouissance* experienced as lost. If we are to become "our own cause" by disturbing our unknown knowledge, we must not only dispel the fantasy that makes us what we are, but also reconfigure it radically. The two dialectical moments (to dispel and reconfigure the fantasy) are part of the same move, as Lacan implies when he says that 'the only moment of *jouissance* that man knows occurs at the site where fantasms are produced, fantasms that represent for us the same barrier as far as access to *jouissance* is concerned, the barrier where everything is forgotten' (Lacan 1992: 298). The partial *jouissance* of the fantasm, or fundamental fantasy, is the only *jouissance* we can concretely experience. There is no massive/mythical

pre-symbolic *jouissance*, but only partial *jouissance* which stems from and is entangled with the Symbolic.

Let us remind ourselves of what "traversing the fantasy" means for Žižek:

> "traversing the fantasy" precisely does *not* designate what this term suggests to a common-sensical approach: "getting rid of the fantasies, the illusionary prejudices and misperceptions, which distort our view of reality, and finally learning to accept realty the way it actually is . . .". In "traversing the fantasy" we do not learn to suspend our phantasmagorical productions – on the contrary, we identify with the work of our "imagination" even more radically, in all its inconsistency – that is to say, prior to its transformation into the phantasmic frame that guarantees our access to reality. At this "zero level", impossible to endure, we have only the pure void of subjectivity, confronted by a multitude of spectral "partial objects" which, precisely, are exemplifications of the Lacanian *lamella*, the undead object-libido. [. . .] It is only at this level that, in the guise of the partial libido-objects, we encounter the impossible object correlative to the pure void of the subject's absolute spontaneity: these partial objects ("here a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition") are the impossible forms in the guise of which the subject *qua* absolute spontaneity "encounters itself amongst objects". (Žižek 2000: 51–2)

The ultimate wager of this book is that it is not only possible, but *necessary*, to conceive of this "zero level" of absolute spontaneity and pure, unendurable imagination, as an unconscious knowledge that awaits its moment to emerge, take shape and shatter the coordinates within which we make sense of today's world. The surplus of this dormant knowledge lies in wait of a chance to be translated into a fearless vision of the society to come, where surplus itself embodies a new relation to *jouissance*. Thought must throw itself beyond its familiar course if it is to legitimize its disengagement from the arrogant order of capital, and the criminal divisions it creates.

# Notes

## Introduction

[1] The Freudian unconscious is described by Žižek as a disembodied machine that 'follows its path irrespective of the demands of the subject's life-world; it stands for the rational subject in so far as it is originally "out of joint", in discord with its contextualized situation [. . .]. In this way, one can also provide a new, unexpected solution to the old phenomenological problem of how the subject can disengage itself from its concrete life-world [. . .]: this disengagement can occur only because there is from the very outset something in the subject that resists its full inclusion into its life-world context, and this "something", of course, is the unconscious as the psychic machine which disregards the requirements of the "reality principle" '. This is why, as Freud claimed, 'the Unconscious is outside time'. The point is that time is, as Heidegger claimed, 'the ontological horizon of the experience of Being', which means that the unconscious is pre-ontological, filling in the space between the pure void of the subject and subjectivation (Žižek 2000a: 62–3).

[2] 'One should bear in mind that the philosopher's task is not to propose solutions, but to reformulate the problem itself, to shift the ideological framework within which we hitherto perceived the problem' (Žižek 2005b).

## Chapter 1

[1] Žižek highlights how today we no longer buy mere objects but, more and more frequently, life-experiences: 'Michel Foucault's notion of turning one's Self into a work of art thus finds unexpected confirmation: I buy my bodily fitness by visiting fitness clubs; I buy my spiritual enlightenment by enrolling in transcendental meditation courses; I buy my public persona by going to restaurants frequented by people with whom I want to be associated' (Žižek 2002a: 287). Though he draws for these claims on Jeremy Rifkin's *The Age of Access*, his conclusion is substantially different from Rifkin's. For Žižek the key fact is that in spite of our post-industrial order dominated by a new type of "cultural capitalism", the market is still here, and so is the sphere of material production.

[2] What 'constitutes a knowledge', for Lacan, is 'the fact that we know that somewhere, in this part that we call the unconscious, a truth is stated which has this property that we can know nothing about it' (*Seminar XVI*, 5 March 1969).

[3] One of the definitions of being human, for Žižek as well as for Lacan, is that for us disposing of excrement is a problem, a source of shame (see Žižek 1997: 5 and 2006b: 194).

[4] Žižek is particularly fond of Samuel Beckett's words from his 1983 novella *Worstward Ho*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (see Žižek 2008a: 210).

[5] Here we should refer to the debate between Žižek and Yannis Stavrakakis, following the latter's publication of *The Lacanian Left* (2007). Žižek does not share Stavrakakis' argument that the democratic potential can be resuscitated through the mobilization of partial enjoyment. In brief, Stavrakakis claims that we need '*an enjoyable democratic ethics of the political*' (Stavrakakis 2007: 269) based not on destabilizing phallic *jouissance* but on partial and balanced democratic enjoyment 'beyond accumulation, domination, and fantasy' (279). For him, '*the democratic citizen needs to be re-conceptualised not only as enduring but as enjoying social lack and emptiness*' (273). Stavrakakis' main reference for this politics of partial enjoyment is Lacan's notion of feminine *jouissance*, which he reads as an ethical injunction to endorse the partiality of one's own enjoyment and thus the partial enjoyment of the other. Žižek, on the other hand, reminds Stavrakakis that Lacan's feminine *jouissance* is the ultimate name for absolute, destabilizing excess (Žižek 2008a: 331). The lack implicit in the feminine "not-all" as developed by Lacan is by definition traumatic, and cannot be integrated directly into a democratic politics. It is this dimension of shattering negativity constitutive of partial enjoyment – indeed, of *jouissance* as such – that is missing from Stavrakakis' analysis.

[6] The documentary is entitled 'Ascenseur pour les fachos'. It was made by the French channel *Canal +* and it is partially available on the web.

[7] In an illuminating passage of the treaty, the tyrant is described as having 'nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you?' (La Boétie 1975: 52).

[8] In the Spartan state, helots were not simple slaves. They were assigned by the state to individual masters who, however, could neither free them nor sell them. They even had a limited access to private property, provided they paid their masters a proportion of what their soil produced. At the same time, their condition was similar to that famously described by Giorgio Agamben as "homo sacer", insofar as the law regularly authorized their murder to prevent rebellion (since they were numerically superior to any other social group in Sparta).

[9] Žižek comments that Lacan's response to the events of 1968 'is best captured as his reversal of the well-known anti-structuralist graffiti from the Paris walls of 1968 "Structures do not walk on the streets!" – if anything, this Seminar [*Seminar XVII*] endeavors to demonstrate how structures DO walk the streets, i.e. how structural shifts can account for the social outbursts like that of 1968' (Žižek 2003).

[10] Žižek has recently stressed how pervasive the problem of exclusion has become in recent decades: 'The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. [. . .] The threat is that we will be reduced to an abstract, empty Cartesian subject dispossessed of all our symbolic content, with our genetic base manipulated,

vegetating in an unliveable environment. This triple threat makes us all proletarians, reduced to "substanceless subjectivity", as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*. The figure of the "part of no part" confronts us with the truth of our own positions; and the ethico-political challenge is to recognize ourselves in this figure. In a way, we are all excluded, from nature as well as from our symbolic substance. Today, we are all potentially *homo sacer*, and the only way to avoid actually becoming so is to act preventively' (Žižek 2009a: 55).

[11] In this sense, Žižek's defence of trash is homologous to his defence of "human surplus". In a recent interview with Astra Taylor on the theme of ecology, which took place against the backdrop of a London rubbish dump, Žižek claims that we should feel at home when surrounded by industrial waste, since it is a reminder that despite the current ideological refrain on how we are moving towards immaterial/intellectual work, today 'there is more material production going on than ever' (in Taylor 2009: 163).

## Chapter 2

[1] 'Today's hedonism combines pleasure with constraint – it is no longer the old notion of the "right measure" between pleasure and constraint, but a kind of pseudo-Hegelian immediate coincidence of the opposites: action and reaction should coincide, the very thing which causes damage should already be the medicine. The ultimate example of it is arguably a *chocolate laxative*, available in the US, with the paradoxical injunction "Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate!", i.e., of the very thing which causes constipation. [. . .] And is not a negative proof of the hegemony of this stance the fact that true unconstrained consumption (in all its main forms: drugs, free sex, smoking . . .) is emerging as the main danger? The fight against these dangers is one of the main investments of today's "biopolitics." Solutions are here desperately sought which would reproduce the paradox of the chocolate laxative. The main contender is "safe sex" – a term which makes one appreciative of the truth of the old saying "Is having sex with a condom not like taking a shower with a raincoat on?". The ultimate goal would be here, along the lines of decaf coffee, to invent "opium without opium": no wonder marijuana is so popular among liberals who want to legalize it – it already IS a kind of "opium without opium" ' (Žižek 2003).

[2] In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault suggests that consumers increasingly share the drive proper of capitalism. The interventionism of neo-liberal social policies, he claims, is aimed at creating the conditions for market economy through the promotion of *competitiveness*, 'without the negative effects that the absence of competition would produce. The *Gesellschaftspolitik* must not nullify the anti-social effects of competition; it must nullify the possible anti-competitive mechanism that could arise within society' (Foucault 2008: 160). This insight gives the notion of consumer's enjoyment a new twist, producing, as it were, the awareness of a new commodity which today is perhaps more deeply at work than any other: "enjoy competition!" People inherit the spirit of capitalism despite not being, technically speaking, capitalists.

[3] Herein lies, according to Žižek, the difference between desire and drive in relation to capitalism: 'At the immediate level of addressing individuals, capitalism of course interpellates them as consumers, as subjects of desire, soliciting in them ever new perverse and excessive desires (for which it offers products to satisfy them); furthermore, it obviously also manipulates the "desire to desire", celebrating the very desire to desire ever new objects and modes of pleasure. However, [. . . ] at this level we do not yet reach drive. The drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, systemic level: drive propels the entire capitalist machinery; it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expended self-reproduction. The capitalist drive thus belongs to no definite individual – it is rather that those individuals who act as direct "agents" of capital (capitalists themselves, top managers) have to practice it. We enter the mode of the drive when (as Marx put it) the circulation of money as capital becomes "an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital therefore has no limits" ' (Žižek 2006a: 117–18).

[4] The idea is that when we approach a *lathouse*, or commodity-object, we "forget the truth"; however, if *léthé* dissolves, the truth of its void emerges (*a-léthéia*), and anxiety kicks in. The paradoxical nature of the lathouse, then, is comparable to that pertaining to the human voice, which produces the objectively describable "object" called language and at the same time carries the unconscious burden of the subject's unfathomable desire.

[5] 'I claim that ecology will slowly turn into the new opium of the masses – the way, you know, Marx defined religion. In what sense? Namely, what we expect from religion is this kind of unquestionable authority: it's God's word, so it just is; you don't debate it. [. . .] I think today, more and more, ecology is starting to function as the ultimate agency of control' (in Taylor 2009: 158).

[6] Incidentally, in *Seminar XVII* Lacan briefly commented on Fellini's film. Although he favours Petronius' original text, from which the film is adapted, he claims that 'it's a good example for drawing the distinction between what the master is and what the rich are' (Lacan 2007: 81).

[7] Apropos the ideological weight of our politicians' "post-ideological" matter-of-factness, one is reminded of the following passage from Adorno, written in 1944: 'The direct statement without divagations, hesitations or reflections, that gives the other the facts full in the face, already has the form and timbre of the command issued under Fascism by the dumb to the silent. Matter-of-factness between people, doing away with all ideological ornamentation between them, has already itself become an ideology for treating people as things' (Adorno 2005: 42).

[8] Žižek comments that 'it is as if the retreat of the Master in capitalism was only a *displacement*: as if the de-fetishization in the "relations between men" was paid for by the emergence of the fetishism in the "relations between things" – by commodity fetishism. The place of fetishism has just shifted from intersubjective relations to relations "between things": the crucial social relations, those of production, are no longer immediately transparent in the form of the interpersonal relations of domination and servitude [. . .]; they disguise themselves – to use Marx's accurate formula – "under the shape of social relations between things, between the products of labour"' (Žižek 1989: 26).

[9] 'Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. [. . .] What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by approximation to it in one's leisure time' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 137).

[10] In the first note of Chapter 2 ('The Process of Exchange') of Volume 1, Marx compares commodities to women, citing, in a passage strangely reminiscent of Lacan (see Lacan 1992: 161–63), a 12th century French poet who, at a fair, came across, alongside a number of commodities, also '*femmes folles de leur corps*' (Marx 1990: 178, original French). From my perspective, today's widespread sexist commodification of the female body can only correspond to ersatz-enjoyment: although, as Žižek reminds us, real sex is always-already virtual, insofar as it demands the intervention of fantasy, perhaps we should introduce a parallax between virtual sexual enjoyment and virtual sexual *jouissance*. On the other hand, surplus-*jouissance* at this level points to the Lacanian theme of sexual difference: although men believe they control women, it is in fact women who control men.

[11] This is why '[t]he exemplary economic strategy of today's capitalism is outsourcing – giving over the "dirty" process of material production (but also publicity, design, accountancy . . .) to another company via subcontracting. In this way, one can easily avoid ecological and health regulations'. Furthermore, 'the predominant skeptical liberal attitude can also be characterized as one of "outsourced belief" (we let the primitive others, "fundamentalists", do their believing for us)' (Žižek 2006b: 371–72).

[12] At the conference 'On the Idea of Communism', which took place at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, London, on 13–15 March 2009.

## Chapter 3

[1] Although, as Žižek observes (see Žižek 2002a: 283–84), this logic has changed today, insofar as the capitalist tends to "own nothing" and constantly re-invest borrowed money, capitalist power remains firmly in place for it relies on the efficacy of its own fetishistic function. The ongoing virtualization of capital, in other words, merely brings to the surface the fundamental mechanism at the heart of real capital.

[2] See Lacan's chapter 'In you more than you' in *Seminar XI* (Lacan 1981: 263–76).

[3] Referring directly to the students, Lacan brilliantly sums up the difference between the entropic libido constitutive of surplus-*jouissance* and the object of desire: 'The object *a* is what makes it possible to introduce a little bit of air into the function of surplus *jouissance*. You are all an object *a*, insofar as you are lined up there – so many miscarriages of what has been, for those who engendered you, the cause of desire. And this is what you have to get your bearings from – psychoanalysis teaches you this' (Lacan 2007: 178). Strictly speaking, human beings are objects of desire produced through the object-cause of desire, i.e. the entropic surplus-*jouissance*.

[4] What is at stake in racism is *jouissance*: 'what really bothers us about the "other" is the peculiar way he organises his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the "excess"

that pertains to this way: the smell of "their" food, "their" noisy songs and dances, "their" strange manners, "their" attitude to work' (Žižek 1993: 202–03). Ultimately, racism is an attempt to displace our subjective inconsistency onto the other in the name of an ordered and harmonious ideal of subjectivity – clearly a failed attempt, as we unwittingly demonstrate this inconsistency precisely by venting our racist hatred.

[5] This is the trouble with utopian theories which try to eliminate surplus-*jouissance*: 'Utopias, designed to eliminate social and other injustice, mostly proposed to achieve this by eliminating this very excess. To a certain extent, even Marx was tempted by the possibility of eliminating, once and for all, the excessive, disharmonious element of society – the element in which he himself recognized its truth, its real and its symptom' (Zupančič 2006: 197).

[6] In distinguishing between "societies of production" and "societies of appropriation", Sohn-Rethel claims that when social production was communal, 'the social practice was rational but the theory was irrational (mythological and anthropomorphic)', whereas with the introduction of commodities and coinage the relation is reversed: 'the social practice has turned irrational (out of man's control) but his mode of thinking has assumed rational forms' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 133–34).

[7] In a very precise annotation, Marx writes that 'machinery is an instance of the way in which the visible products of labour take on the appearance of its masters. [. . .] They too [the machines] confront the workers as the *powers* of capital. They become separated effectively from the skill and the knowledge of the individual worker; and even though ultimately they are themselves the products of labour, they appear as an *integral* part of capital wherever they intervene in the labour process' (Marx 1990: 1055).

[8] 'With a technology dependent on the knowledge of the workers the capitalist mode of production would be an impossibility' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 123).

[9] Here we should consider the well-known fact that the birth of capitalism did not decree the end of what Marx called "primitive accumulation", i.e. the expropriation of land and other goods by violent means. Rather, primitive accumulation (the flow of all kinds of wealth into Western Europe from Latin America, Africa and Asia, as well as internal confiscation of land) was a fundamental factor in the rise of capitalism. To this day, capitalistic social relations continue to exist in close connection with the plundering of resources from non-capitalist economies (oil, mining companies, etc.). This connection should constantly remind us of one of the brutally violent aspects of the capitalist system, quite aside from its legalized expropriation of value from workers.

[10] Žižek's filmic reference here hits the nail right on the head: 'When, in a James Bond movie, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the proud socialist-realist presentation of factory production? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode this site of production in a fireball, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world where the working class is "disappearing" ' (Žižek 2002a: 289–90).

[11] The question of the minimal difference between surplus-value and surplus-*jouissance* can also be appreciated from the point of view of the commodity: 'in

Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack ("castration") around which the symbolic network is articulated' (Žižek 1989: 49).

## Chapter 4

[1] In Volume 1 of *Capital*, we read that 'surplus-value does not arise from the labour-power that has been replaced by the machinery, but from the labour-power actually employed in working with the machine. Surplus-value arises only from the variable part of capital, and we saw that the amount of surplus-value depends on two factors, namely the rate of surplus-value and the number of workers simultaneously employed' (Marx 1990: 530).

[2] For a lucid and uncompromising critique of communicative capitalism see Dean (2009).

[3] See the section of the *Grundrisse* known as "Fragment on the Machines", in Marx (1993: 690–706).

## Chapter 5

[1] Industrialization and the imposition of the world market caused the birth of the so-called Third World: 'With the exchange of industrial products, the products of nonindustrial nations were forced to specialize – namely, in raw materials – which brought about unevenness. Ever since, this unevenness has been reproduced every day'. Marx predicted the impoverishment of the proletariat, which has not always been the case in modern countries like the UK – but why? Because 'British capital gained surplus value from foreign trade, which was redistributed to the compatriot workers to a certain extent. That is to say that the impoverishment occurred less within one nation-state, namely, Great Britain, than to people abroad. And, of course, this is still going on: More than half of the population of earth is experiencing famine' (Karatani 2005: 262–63). This point about the violence of the market is crucial: if workers become better off here it is because more surplus-value is extracted from workers elsewhere, i.e. in less advanced countries where non-capitalist production is forced out of competition, and the workforce plus raw materials are sold on the cheap.

[2] Karatani of course acknowledges that '[i]t was Antonio Negri who radically challenged the Marxist convention that the proletariat becomes an autonomous subject in the process of production' (290). However, he adds that 'Negri misreads *Capital*', insofar as he follows the cliché that surplus-value belongs only in the production process (Karatani 2005: 290–91). In his *Marx beyond Marx*, Negri suggests to read *Capital* in the light of the *Grundrisse*, thus shifting the focus from surplus-value theory (*Capital*) to circulation theory (*Grundrisse*). What he misses, according to Karatani, is the extent to which surplus-value also affects the circulation process – workers truly become subjects (and therefore able to embrace class struggle) only "passing through" consumption.

[3] 'Capital cannot realize surplus value unless it succeeds in selling its products, namely, unless its products achieve value as commodities. But the problem is that the potential buyers of the commodity are in reality either other capitals and/or their laborers. This is the dilemma of individual capitalists. Going after profit, capital tries to reduce wages and elongate labor-time [. . .]. But if all capitals follow these tenets unconditionally, surplus value won't be realized because the potential buyers of the commodities, namely, the laborers, will be worn out and beaten. Thus the more the individual capitals seek to attain profit, the worse the recession gets in toto'. This is why for Karatani consumerism, arising from Fordism and Keynesianism after the Great Depression, is a crucial stage in the development of capitalism. 'Marx was well aware that the realization of surplus value is completed in the process of circulation' (Karatani 2005: 236–37).

[4] Of course Marx himself saw the commodity as a form, as 'a social hieroglyphic', and not immediately as value: 'Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being value is as much men's social product as is their language' (Marx 1990: 167). This is what Marx already discovers: value is a way to come to terms with the surplus that belongs to social labour, to Lacan's *savoir-faire*. Karatani adds that value is as necessary as language, a necessity which arises from our impotence towards the object we have created. Like languages, it fixes the object-commodity into a relational system, a symbolic order.

[5] Marx states that 'the rate of profit is the historical starting point. Surplus value and the rate of surplus value are, relative to this, the invisible essence to be investigated, whereas the rate of profit and hence the form of surplus-value as profit are visible surface phenomena' (Marx 1981: 134).

[6] As Žižek is keen to reiterate, Hegel's Christ stands for the fragile appearance of God in the flesh, a concrete, immanent and most of all finite appearance which reflects (or coincides with) the "absolute fragility" of God himself, inasmuch as it is in this fragility that it realizes its absolute and divine moment. Along the same lines, Christ's death reflects God's death in signalling the sublime moment when self-relating negativity, or radical finitude, heralds the New qua Christian community of the Holy Spirit. The immanent dimension of God is decisive in Hegel's (no matter how changing) apperception of Christianity vis-à-vis other religions, and specifically Judaism. Already in his Frankfurt years (1797–1800), Hegel started questioning the epistemological gulf which Kantian metaphysics placed between God and humanity, a gulf which of course Kant tried to fill by claiming the necessity of morality (see for example Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, written in 1799). This is why for Hegel Judaism is an eminently Kantian notion, inasmuch as it conceives God as an infinite power which sets the difference between itself and humankind. Indeed, it can be said that this difference is what Hegel's philosophy tries to overcome.

[7] Although the two contexts of production and consumption are substantially different and should be analysed accordingly, we should also perceive the *fil rouge* connecting them, in order to articulate this connection in political terms. In this respect, my insisted references to Lacan's *Seminar XVII* are motivated by a precise

thesis: that Lacan had actually identified the existence of these two parallaxes, although he did not fully develop their connection and therefore their significance for a theory of the demise of capitalism.

[8] Karatani notes that the majority of production today is still non-capitalist. However, capitalism controls the globe because it creates a world market. So once again Karatani shifts the emphasis from production to consumption, quoting Marx: 'The circulation of commodities is the starting point of capital. [. . .] World trade and the world market date from the sixteenth century, and from then on the modern history of capital starts to unfold' (Karatani 2005: 252; Marx 1990: 247). Fragments of commodity economy come to be connected with the world market. At some point, money becomes the common currency dismantling autarchic communities around the world. 'Since then, no matter what people of communities the world over wanted, or, in other words, even though their lives were not always carried on within the commodity economy, their products come to be *virtually and forcibly* posited in the chain of the global commodity economy' (Karatani 2005: 252–53). We have many non-capitalist modes of production that are caught within the world market as if they were capitalist enterprises. Thus they are marginalized, and the capitalist mode of production seems omnipresent. Once the world market extends everywhere, non-capitalist production is forced to compete with (and generally succumb to) capitalist production, with the consequence that it often goes into forming the reserve army for industrial capitalism. If, as Karatani rightly claims, the point is to undermine the world market and promote non-capitalist modes of production, what is missing in his analysis is the key reference to the surplus formed in production.

[9] To exemplify the meaning of parallax in the class context, Žižek uses the difference between the English words "pig" and "pork": the first, indicating the animal, was the word used by underprivileged Saxon farmers, while the second, indicating the meat, originates from French and was introduced by the privileged Norman conquerors (see Žižek 2006b: 393).

[10] When discussing Hegel's master and servant dialectics, Lacan claims in unambiguous terms: 'What, in sum, is the point of entry of this brute, the master, into the phenomenology of mind, as Hegel puts it? The truth of what he articulates is absolutely seductive and sensational. We can actually read it there, opposite us, provided we allow ourselves to be taken in by it, since I assert, precisely, that it cannot be read off directly. The truth of what he articulates is this – the relationship to this real insofar as it is, properly speaking, impossible' (Lacan 2007: 170).

[11] Despite the laudable attempt to concretely confront the problem of power, one nevertheless cannot help hearing in this position those which from my perspective are a series of unpalatable echoes: anarchism, Foucault's retreat into the "ethics of the aesthetic", utopian messianism and so on.

## Chapter 6

[1] In French, credit points are interestingly called *unités de valeur*: 'You are the product of the university, and you prove that you are surplus value, [. . .] equivalent to

more or fewer credit points. You come here to gain credit points for yourselves. You leave here stamped, "credit points" ' (Lacan 2007: 201).

[2] Žižek claims that its relying on the gaze of the Other is also the ultimate limitation of shame: 'And this holds even for Oedipus: why did he blind himself after discovering the truth about himself? Not to punish himself, but to escape the unbearable gaze of the Other' (Žižek 2005a: 177).

[3] In the Vincennes session of December 1969, Lacan famously addressed the students thus: 'the revolutionary aspiration has only a single possible outcome – of ending up as the master's discourse. [. . .] What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one' (Lacan 2007: 207).

## Chapter 7

[1] The big Other is defined by Lacan as 'the locus in which everything that can be articulated on the basis of the signifier comes to be inscribed' (Lacan 1998: 81), or, more succinctly, as 'the locus in which speech in constituted' (Lacan 2000: 274). In other words, the big Other is the invisible symbolic framework that needs to be presupposed if the subject is to engage in any communicative activity or social exchange. It exists only through the positing activity of the subjects caught in its network.

[2] According to Žižek, Foucault is therefore on the same plane as Habermas in rejecting the foundational presence of the parallax, or antagonism. In Foucauldian anti-universalism 'each subject must, without any support from universal rules, build his own mode of self-mastery; he must harmonize the antagonism of the powers within himself – invent himself, so to speak, produce himself as a subject, find his own particular art of living' (Žižek 1989: 2).

[3] Apropos Lacan's subjective destitution, Žižek claims that 'at the end of the psychoanalytic cure, the analysand has to suspend the urge to symbolize/internalize, to interpret, to search for a "deeper meaning"; he has to accept that the traumatic encounters which traced out the itinerary of his life were utterly contingent and indifferent, that they bear no "deeper message" ' (Žižek 2007a: 94).

[4] Put differently, the subject qua site of antagonistic substance is the opposite of the subject of interpellation: 'far from emerging as the outcome of interpellation, the subject emerges only when and in so far as interpellation liminally *fails*. Not only does the subject never fully recognize itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation) *is* the subject' (Žižek in Butler *et al.* 2000: 115).

[5] Which also means that through the process of subjectivation we "set up" the symbolic order, i.e. the self is what "plugs the hole" in the big Other.

[6] In Hegelian terms, Christ is the reflexive determination of God, inasmuch as he gives positive form to the enigma of God's infinite creativity. In a totally different context, Žižek argues that '(f)or a woman, a man's erection is clearly the reflexive determination of her own attractiveness: what she sees/reads in her partner's erection is the reflection of her sexual attraction' (Žižek 2004c: 70). As far as our reference to negativity is concerned, it is interesting here to add a fairly obvious Lacanian consideration: the erection as such is nothing but the reflexive

determination of the negativity of the phallus. In an earlier text, Žižek draws on sexual difference to claim that 'man is a reflexive determination of woman's impossibility of achieving an identity with herself (which is why woman is a symptom of man)' (Žižek 1990: 253).

[7] This also means that the field of meaning exists only insofar as we submit ourselves to the process of subjectivation, as exemplified by Kafka's famous parable of the 'Door of the Law', where the doorkeeper eventually shouts in the ear of the dying man from the country that the door was there only for him; what the man from the country had failed to account for through his fascinated reverence to the law was precisely that his very being was always-already included in the symbolic order.

[8] In contemporary philosophy, Giorgio Agamben can be seen as the main champion of negative biopolitics, while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri find in it a positive potential.

[9] This also allows us to outline the difference between discourse and ideology. In Žižek, ideology is not merely an effect of discourse, for in his view only the *explicit* ideological text can be deemed discursive, while the *implicit* core of ideology is anchored in the Real *qua* non-discursive kernel of *jouissance*. The problem with discourse analysis is that it fails to consider the crucial non-discursive element upon whose disavowal every discursive/ideological practice relies.

[10] In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud tells about his nineteen months old daughter talking in her sleep about strawberries (as well as other types of food). Since she had been kept without food all day as a consequence of feeling sick, Freud argues that her dream expressed a clear case of wish-fulfilment. More precisely, Anna was taking revenge on the nurse who had sentenced that her sickness was due to her gorging on strawberries (Freud 1997: 41).

[11] Žižek's main inspiration here is clearly Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and the notion of historical materialism therein articulated, especially in relation to Benjamin's well-known approach to a given historical subject as 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past' (Benjamin 1986: 263).

[12] This is precisely the problem with today's attitude towards global capitalism: 'The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as Fate, against which we cannot fight – either we accept it or we fall out of step with history, and are crushed' (Žižek 2004b: 73).

[13] Adrian Johnston has made a similar point: 'Although an Act is indeed not an action (and although far from every action can or does become an act), there is, nonetheless, no Act without an action. A politics of the pure Act, one that eschews engaging in any specifications concerning actions to be performed, is an empty "politics without politics"' (Johnston 2004: 279). One of Johnston's main concerns in critically addressing Žižek's politics can be expressed with the notion of "pre-evental politics". One must engage in practical actions and yet be ready for the "big act"; what this means is that 'the practitioner of a politics of minimal differences be prepared to leap (often as a sort of leap of faith) from theoretical assessment to practical intervention when the opening for revolutionarily forcing through a "premature" system destabilizing dysfunction seems suddenly to present itself' (Johnston 2009: 165). Žižek, Johnston claims, has now abandoned his early emphasis on the Lacanian act and admitted the necessity for a "pre-evental

discipline of time" (Johnston's definition). He has moved away 'from a celebration of the act as an unforeseen, out-of-nowhere miracle' and has embraced a more 'sober and atheistic Marxist-Leninist understanding of effective revolutionary interventions as non-miraculous points of culmination condensing a combination of preceding arduous intellectual and practical work with the unpredictable workings of intra-situational chance and contingencies' (167). However, to what extent does this prescriptive kind of politics, finely balanced between theory and practice, address the real problem with Žižek's politics? What if Johnston, taking as his central political reference the quandary of the act, accords too much importance to the old dilemma of the gap between theory and practice – and consequently to the difference between action and act? What if this is a false problem? We should first acknowledge, with Johnston, that Žižek contends that the dichotomy between theory and practice is unbridgeable, it requires a *salto mortale* which cannot be theorized (included in theory) in advance. Similarly, the difference between a conscious, strategic political action and the "madness" of the act cannot be discerned by theory, it remains available only to those who are engaged in a given practical project. However, I would argue that what is at stake in Žižek's theoretical edifice is something different, often unacknowledged by Žižek himself, in as much as it concerns *theory* and not its relation to practice. That is to say: it concerns the necessity for theory to accomplish an act that is internal to theory itself, namely an act of creative sublimation which confronts the constitutive deadlock of knowledge.

[14] This is also the meaning of Žižek's claim that 'those who think ontologically have to err ontically' (Žižek 2008a: 98): the insurmountable gap between theory and practice is also the gap between symbolic planning and the Real actualization of the plan. This gap, he argues, can be defined with the word "trauma": 'a traumatic encounter entails a "loss of reality" which has to be understood in the strong philosophical sense of the loss of ontological horizon – in trauma, we are momentarily exposed to the "raw" ontic thing not yet covered/screened by the ontological horizon' (Žižek 2008a: 146).

## Chapter 8

[1] To define subtraction, Žižek has recently drawn on Badiou: 'Badiou's "subtraction," like Hegel's *Aufhebung*, contains three different layers of meaning: (1) to withdraw, disconnect; (2) to reduce the complexity of a situation to its minimal difference; (3) to destroy the existing order. As in Hegel, the solution is not to differentiate the three meanings [. . .], but to grasp subtraction as the unity of its three dimensions: one should withdraw from being immersed in a situation in such a way that the withdrawal renders visible the "minimal difference" sustaining the situation's multiplicity, and thereby causes its disintegration, just as the withdrawal of a single card from a house of cards causes the collapse of the entire edifice' (Žižek 2009c: 129). In the present book I try to problematize this vision by emphasizing (1) the intrinsically parallactic nature of subtraction qua act of withdrawal, insofar as it depends on our successful disconnection from our unconscious libidinal attachment to a given situation, and (2) the necessity to

conceive of subtraction as the intervention of the *same* negative/unconscious force from which sublimation, and thus the urge to produce new knowledge, must arise.

[2] In 'On the Jewish Question', for instance, Marx claims that with the bourgeois revolution and the birth of the modern liberal-democratic state, man sinks in ever deeper forms of alienation, directly related to the growing division between his withering public role and his growing private interests. Hence Marx's disdain for 'the so-called rights of man': 'Therefore not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires and separated from the community. In the rights of man it is not man who appears as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself, society, appears as a framework extraneous to the individuals, as a limitation of their original independence. The only bond which holds them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and their egoistic persons' (Marx 1992: 230).

[3] In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that 'art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by proving semblance and consolation' (Adorno 1997: 32).

[4] In his definition of democracy, Badiou rightly includes the paradox of "humanitarian wars": 'Today the word "democracy" is the principal organiser of consensus. It is a word that supposedly unites the collapse of the socialist States, the putative well-being enjoyed in our countries and the humanitarian crusades of the West. [. . .] it stands to reason that humanity aspires to democracy, and any subjectivity suspected of not being democratic is regarded as pathological. At best it refers to a patient re-education, at worst to the right of military intervention by democratic paratroopers' (Badiou 2005b: 78).

[5] It is worth recalling Žižek's insightful interpretation of the 2004 Abu-Ghraib scandal involving American soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq. Against Christopher Hitchens' reading of the events, Žižek argues that the soldiers who imparted the tortures were neither betraying their field nor executing direct orders from the US Army. To claim, as Hitchens did, that they were mutineers or traitors, 'is the same nonsense as the claim that the Ku Klux Klan lynchings were the acts of traitors to Western Christian civilization, not the outburst of its obscene underside; or that the abuses of children by Catholic priests are acts of "traitors" of Catholicism. [. . .] in being submitted to humiliating tortures, the Iraqi prisoners were *in effect* initiated into American culture, they got the taste of its obscene underside which forms the necessary supplement to the public values of personal dignity, democracy, and freedom. No wonder, then, that it is gradually becoming clear how the ritualistic humiliation of Iraqi prisoners was not a limited case, but part of a widespread practice' (Žižek 2006b: 370).

[6] See also Žižek's similar interpretation of Jean-Marie le Pen's scandalous political achievement in the French presidential elections of April–May 2002, when he defeated Lionel Jospin and made it to the final round against Jacques Chirac: 'what we should always bear in mind is that Le Pen stands for the only serious political force in France which, in clear contrast to the suffocating lethargy of

hegemonic post-politics, *persists in a stance of radical politicization*, of (perverted, but non the less "live") political passion proper. [. . .] the tragedy is that Le Pen, in his very repulsive provocation, stands for Life against post-political Death as the way of life of the Last Men' (Žižek 2002b: 136). Here the point is not only that le Pen represents the obscene underbelly of liberal-democratic post-politics, but that in such a position he, and his politics, should remind the left of the stance of radical politicization it has completely forsaken. Whether we agree with Žižek or not on le Pen's case, what needs to be highlighted and endorsed is the indictment of the calamitous vacuity of the current post-political hegemony.

[7] The same can be said about violence, another term regularly rehabilitated by Žižek: precisely because any kind of power always relies on 'an obscene stain of violence' (Žižek 2006b: 338), the very goal of securing power through revolution necessarily involves some kind of violence. Žižek's infamous plea for ethical violence, or good terror, is therefore predicated on the awareness that violence is systemic, i.e. it is inevitably part of any social link we create and inhabit. Simply put, the point is to convert "bad" systemic violence into "ethical violence".

[8] In fact, Žižek holds that as far as the struggle for real emancipation is concerned, 'it is the populist fundamentalist, not the liberal, who is, in the long run, our ally. In all their anger, they are not radical enough to perceive the link between capitalism and the moral decay they deplore'; this implies that we should 'dare to look for an ally in what often looks like the ultimate enemy of multi-culti liberalism: today's crucial "sites of resistance" against global capitalism are often deeply marked by religious fundamentalism' (Žižek 2006b: 364–65).

[9] As Žižek reminds us: 'Freud already knew about the connection between narcissism and immersion in a crowd, best rendered by the Californian phrase "sharing an experience" ' (Žižek 2008a: 35).

[10] What Scottie does not realize is of course that his falling in love with Madeleine/Judy was always included in the plan organized by his friend Gavin Elster to eliminate his wife – in fact, it was the crucial element in the plan.

[11] Along similar lines, Özselçuk and Madra argue that Žižek's 'invocations of certain exceptional social agents as the harbinger for revolutionary politics provide little in the way of substantiating and qualifying the relevant conditions behind such anticipations', and that in Žižek political agency 'is simply assumed, not constructed' (Özselçuk and Madra 2007: 79 and 100–01). For other critical views on Žižek's politics see Devenney (2007), Homer (2001), Laclau (2000), Robinson and Tormey (2005), Sharpe (2004).

## Chapter 9

[1] Lacan elaborated extensively on the concept of sublimation in *Seminar VII*, especially in relation to femininity and courtly love.

[2] The notion of "vanishing mediator", which Žižek takes from Fredric Jameson, is described as 'the moment of closure when the subject's act of decision changes into its opposite; establishes a new symbolic network by means of which History again acquires the self-evidence of a linear evolution' (Žižek 2008c: 190). To underline the radical and traumatic implications for the revolutionary subject

mediating between the abyssal contingency of history and the beginning of a new harmony, Žižek draws on such literary examples as Brecht's *The Measure Taken* and Heiner Müller's *Mauser* (Žižek 2000a: 378–80). See for example the following emblematic passage: 'A revolution is achieved (*not* betrayed) when "it eats its own children", the excess that was necessary to set it in motion. In other words, the ultimate revolutionary ethical stance is not that of simple devotion and fidelity to the Revolution but, rather, that of willingly accepting the role of "vanishing mediator", of the excessive executioner to be executed (as the "traitor") so that the Revolution can achieve its ultimate goal' (379).

[3] Žižek takes Mao's Cultural Revolution as an example of the failure to transform negativity into a new positive order through the intervention of some vanishing mediator. The Cultural Revolution is depicted as an extreme explosion of *jouissance* and negativity, which however was not radical enough in the sense that it did not question its own presuppositions, i.e. it did not proceed to negate itself. It was a carnivalesque excess not followed by sublimation, by the reinvention of everyday life. Although the empowering of the subproletariat was in itself the right thing to do, it did not lead to a new order because it was merely instrumental to Mao's attempt to regain command against internal enemies after the miserable failure of the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s, when millions starved to death. The opposite effort can be chronicled through Lenin's attempts at collectivizations in the late 1920s. What post-revolutionary Russia tried to achieve was precisely the second, most difficult stage of the revolution, sustained by the effort to "learn to desire again", reinvent "a new mode of dreaming" (see Žižek 2008a: 193–97).

[4] In *Bíos*, Roberto Esposito explores the etymological origin of such words as "freedom" and "liberty" to conclude that they allude to 'a connective power that grows and develops according to its own internal law, and to an expansion or to a deployment that unites its members in a shared dimension' (Esposito 2008: 70). He uses this biopolitical understanding of freedom to criticize various distortions of the term that took place in modernity, where freedom has come to be identified with the opposite of its original meaning, i.e. self-mastery, free will, security and more generally the liberal endorsement of individualism. From our perspective, Esposito's biopolitical emphasis on *communitas* vis-à-vis today's "politics of fear" (*immunitas*), shares with other conceptions of biopolitics the same problematic assumption, inasmuch as it attempts to posit the sustainability of the modality of subtracted subjectivity. What these positions miss is that the subtractive contraction from the symbolic order cannot seamlessly engender a new "singularised we", a new communitarian identity not sustained by the big Other, i.e. not alienated. The proper paradox of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that although the big Other does not exist, it needs to be presupposed if there is to be a minimum of social exchange, a minimum of community. The attempts to think biopolitics beyond negativity tend to ignore the necessity of the big Other. Having said that, what we should reflect on in relation to biopolitics is perhaps a slightly different question. What if the task ahead is to think the key passage through subtraction – through the "I would prefer not to" addressed to global capitalism – as a communal effort, or even better an effort which *can only be accomplished by a collective*? If I am alone, my subtraction will fail, as it failed for poor Bartleby in Melville's

short story. Perhaps we need to vie for a different Bartleby, one that bases his subtraction in communal exchange, without losing sight of the fact that this effort will remain at least minimally traumatic. To put it more radically: perhaps it is only in this sharing of the surplus of symbolization that freedom can be found, beyond its liberal misuse.

[5] Commenting on G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, Žižek argues that the revolutionary dimension of Christianity stems from the awareness that man's distance from God overlaps with God's distance from himself, the latter being epitomized by Christ's doubting the existence of God as suprasensible entity in his cry "Father, why have you forsaken me?" (see Žižek and Milbank 2009: 237).

## Chapter 10

[1] Johnston suggests that Žižek's theory of fetishistic disavowal can be turned against itself as a case of potential cynicism: 'the danger is that the very analyses developed by Žižek in his assault upon late-capitalist ideology might serve to facilitate the sustenance of the cynical distance whose underlying complicity with the current state of affairs he describes so well' (Johnston 2004: 281).

[2] Žižek applies the same method in his analysis of violence: though we are submerged by images of brutal, direct violence (crime, terror, civil unrest, international conflict and so on), 'we should learn to step back, disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance' (Žižek 2008b: 1).

[3] See especially Žižek's brief piece 'Resistance is Surrender', whose argument is encapsulated in the following passage: 'The big demonstrations in London and Washington against the US attack on Iraq a few years ago offer an exemplary case of this strange symbiotic relationship between power and resistance. Their paradoxical outcome was that both sides were satisfied. The protesters saved their beautiful souls: they made it clear that they don't agree with the government's policy on Iraq. Those in power calmly accepted it, even profited from it: not only did the protests in no way prevent the already-made decision to attack Iraq; they also served to legitimise it. Thus George Bush's reaction to mass demonstrations protesting his visit to London, in effect: "You see, this is what we are fighting for, so that what people are doing here – protesting against their government policy – will be possible also in Iraq!" ' (Žižek 2007b).

[4] Žižek refers to the case of a friend of his whose wife tragically died of cancer: he was able to keep a balanced demeanour only because he had his wife's beloved hamster, which functioned as the fetish for his disavowed pain. Once the hamster died, he broke down and was hospitalized with suicidal depression. 'So when we are bombarded by claims that in our post-ideological cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideals, when we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always encounter such claims with the question: OK, but where is your hamster – the fetish

which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality "the way it is"?' (Žižek 2007c: 252; see also Žižek 2001a: 13–14).

[5] I am referring to Adorno's famous text 'The Stars Down to Earth', written in 1952–53, where he analyses an astrology column in the *Los Angeles Times* as an example of the irrationalism (or pseudo-rationalism) underpinning the concealed authoritarian and ideological tendencies within enlightened modernity (see Adorno 1994). For Adorno astrology demonstrates the success of instrumental reason in neutralizing, and eventually eliminating, all references to a non-symbolizable otherness.

## Chapter 11

[1] Here is the extract from the 2003 interview: Q: 'So what do you propose as an alternative?' A: 'There's the puzzle. I would say, a new version of what was once called socialism. I think about this in modest terms. I like to portray myself as a fake magician – I have the hat, but I still don't have the rabbit. I'm not saying that there are answers – I'm just saying there will be huge problems'.

[2] 'What is at stake is to *relate ethically to antagonism and jouissance*, as opposed to the unethical, unproductive and even dangerous standpoint of eliminating or mythologising them: to sublimate instead of repressing, to inject passion into the radicalisation of democracy and the reinvigoration of political discourse instead of channelling it into racist and nationalist aggression or reducing politics to the unattractive spectacle of the neutral administration of unavoidable necessities. This is the horizon the Lacanian Left opens for us' (Žižek 2008a: 226).

[3] 'That is, in my opinion, why Žižek is not exactly in the field of philosophy, but in the field of a new topology, a new topology for the interpretation of concrete facts in a situation, political events and so on. Though, here, I mean interpretation not in the hermeneutic sense, but in the psychoanalytic sense. Žižek offers us something like a general psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis that exceeds the question of clinics and becomes an absolutely general psychoanalysis. This is the first time that anyone has proposed to psychoanalyze our whole world' (Badiou 2005a: 41).

[4] Hegel described this short-circuit with the well-known equivalence between subject and substance. According to Žižek, what this equivalence implies is the coincidence of two impediments which prevent subject and substance to achieve full self-identity.

[5] Žižek claims that this notion of surplus-*jouissance* as object makes us aware of 'the abyss that separates Lacan from the line of thought that runs from Bergson to Deleuze [. . .]: *objet a* means that libido has to be apprehended not as a reservoir of free-floating energy but as an object, an "incorporeal organ" ("lamella"). We are dealing here with a *cause*: desire (i.e. subject) has a cause precisely in so far as surplus-enjoyment is an object' (Žižek 1994b: 50–1).

[6] And yet there are other passages in Adorno where he seems to intuit the reflexivity of otherness: 'It is up to philosophy to think the things which differ from the thought *and yet make it a thought*, exclusively, while their demon seeks to persuade the thought that it ought not to be' (Adorno 2000: 192, my emphasis).

[7] From this perspective, to actualise Žižek would then mean to locate the Lacanian *mi-dire* of his theory, the point of *constitutive inconsistency* of his theoretical edifice. It would mean to identify the element of *jouissance* which acts as the motor of his thought, being "internally external" (*extimate*) to it.

[8] A philosophy may inspire a leader, who then inspires the masses to revolt. All these moments are vital, but one would not go very far without the "inexplicable man in revolt", the drive of the oppressed. What a theory must do is not only locate the symptomal points in a given historical constellation, but also "find itself in the Real of its actualization", have the courage to betray itself in the awareness that in this betrayal lies its actualization. Here we have the parallax, the jump into the void, the blind step that theory has to accomplish if it is to survive in today's anti-theoretical times.

[9] Adorno's insistence on the negativity of thought is almost inhuman, unsustainable: 'What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft, while thought figures such as proximity, home, security hold the faulty world under their spell. Men are afraid that in losing this magic they would lose everything, because the only happiness they know, even in thought, is to be able to hold on to something – the perpetuation of unfreedom' (Adorno 2000: 33).

[10] The object of Marx's historical materialism was, of course, the economy, insofar as for him the non-economic features of human existence originated and developed from the economic organization of its material conditions. To this basic stance, already problematized by the Frankfurt School, Žižek effectively adds its Hegelian foundation, claiming that the mind itself (ideologies, social, cultural and political institutions, etc.) is already the result of (the disavowal of) a material cause or libido-object named *jouissance*.

[11] Žižek argues that 'the traditional opposition between epistemology and ontology should be left behind. [. . .] In a properly Hegelian way, our painful progress of knowledge, our confusions, our search for solutions, that is to say, precisely that which seems to *separate* us from the way reality really is out there, is already the innermost constituent of reality itself' (Žižek 2004c: 56).

## Chapter 12

[1] 'The return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically *re-enacting* the "good old revolutionary times", nor at an opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of an old programme to "new conditions", but at *repeating*, in the present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism – more precisely: after the politico-ideological collapse of the long era of progressivism in the catastrophe of 1914' (Žižek 2002: 11).

[2] First, the period from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune (1792–1871); then the period from the Russian Revolution to the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1917–76). Now, he claims, we are awaiting the beginning of a third sequence (see Badiou 2009b: 105–17).

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